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# A Critique of Postmodern Feminism: The Theoretical, Pedagogical, and Real-World Limitations of Liberation from Essence Ideology

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**A Critique of Postmodern Feminism:  
The Theoretical, Pedagogical, and Real-World  
Limitations of “Liberation from Essence”  
Ideology**

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April 25, 2014

*Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Prerequisite for Honors in American  
Studies*

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Chapter 1	
From Aesthetics to Ideology: The Twentieth Century Postmodern Condition.....	13
Chapter 2	
A Brief History of American Feminism and Its Evolution Towards A Liberation from Essence Mindset.....	26
Chapter 3	
Flaws of Liberation from Essence Feminism in the Academic Sphere.....	40
Chapter 4	
Case Studies of the Liberation from Essence Mentality in the Public Sphere.....	60
Conclusion.....	80
Acknowledgements.....	87
Works Cited & Bibliography.....	88

## Introduction

The inspiration for my thesis topic came from an unlikely source. Having never taken an art or art history course, I encountered an essay in the *New English Review* entitled “The Tyranny of Artistic Modernism.” In this essay, the authors described the modernist aesthetic that dominates our age, tying architectural and literary theory into their analysis of social and cultural changes. While their essay is highly critical of modernism and its descendent, postmodernism, and the authors are clearly writing from a traditionalist perspective, they described and illuminated a particularly fascinating dichotomy. In this dichotomy, the authors distinguish between the traditional and the modern conceptions of freedom, proposing that the difference is that the former views “freedom as a perfection of essence rather than a liberation from it.”<sup>1</sup> While it is clear that in this context they define freedom in the artistic sense of self-expression, creative liberty, and professional fulfillment, this idea need not be applied only to aesthetic theory.

Most academics are quick to recognize the relationship between aesthetic, social, and political theory, as the three spheres seem to evolve contemporaneously and to gain independent value only as they influence and permeate the other spheres. A primary academic and personal interest of mine is social theory and its complex relationship with political, religious, psychological, and economic issues. With this in mind, I am applying the perfection of versus liberation from essence dichotomy to an analysis of areas other than art. I am particularly interested in the sociological implications of feminist ideology

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Signorelli and Nikos Salingaros, “The Tyranny of Artistic Modernism,” *New*

and its relationship to postmodernism, with postmodern understood to describe both an intellectual theory and the twentieth-century *condition* of knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

If there is indeed a strong link between postmodernism and feminism, then it is reasonable to ask whether any flaws identified in postmodern theory might also be identified in feminist theory, and whether the same ideas postmodern theory rejects are also rejected by feminists. Assuming there is a link between postmodernism and feminism, then it makes sense to assess to what extent the perfection of versus liberation from essence dichotomy might be concretely at play in feminist ideology. In order to explore this in my thesis, I argue that the contemporary and dominant strains of feminist ideology are strongly influenced by postmodernism. In particular, I am interested in the freedom as liberation from essence view as a core aspect of postmodernism, and I will argue that this view is present in and even underlies much of contemporary feminist thought in both the academic and public spheres. Next, I will argue that a liberation from essence view is limiting and perhaps even damaging to the feminist cause, and I will attempt to articulate a more constructive approach.

The thesis is informed by thought from several different fields, including postmodern aesthetic theory, poststructuralist philosophy, feminist theory and epistemology, and cognitive sociology. In the first chapter, I review the scholarship on postmodernism and its roots as an aesthetic theory. I show how what began as a movement among artists and writers eventually began to dominate in the broader academic and public realms, eventually becoming not just an obscure theory but also an

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984).

actual “condition” of society. The idea of postmodernism as a condition comes from Jean-Francois Lyotard’s work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. As Lyotard describes, “The postmodern would be that which...puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.”<sup>3</sup> In order to do this, authors and artists must work outside of the rituals of piety that have previously prevented people from portraying and encountering the unrepresentable. They must endeavor to “free” themselves, or to pursue artistic and professional fulfillment, by breaking from previous traditions, standards, or modes of expression.

This condition is based on a certain understanding of human nature – one that is contested by traditionalist critics. The practice of displaying and expressing this misunderstanding began with the modern art movement, but, as Lyotard describes, evolved into a postmodern condition of society throughout the twentieth century. The goal of this chapter is to describe postmodernism as it originated in art and literature, and to describe in detail how the postmodern theoretical framework constitutes a condition of society, in the sense that it guides the “state of knowledge” and the ways of knowing, including an understanding of human nature. It is crucial to contextualize this thoroughly in order to successfully make my argument about feminist theory and to analyze it using cognitive sociology.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 81.

Sociologist Ben Agger wrote extensively about the sociological relevance of postmodernism and its siblings, the fields of critical theory and poststructuralism. As he describes them, “Critical theory, poststructuralism, and postmodernism are effective as critiques of positivism, interrogating taken-for-granted assumptions about the ways in which people write and read science.”<sup>4</sup> Agger summarizes the basic tenets of each school of thought. Critical theory, pioneered by the Frankfurt School, attempted to understand why Marx’s revolutions did not occur as predicted. Its members put forth the notion that “Capitalism deepens false consciousness, suggesting to people that the existing social system is both inevitable and rational.”<sup>5</sup> It follows from this that instead of recognizing opportunities for transformation and change, as predicted, “people ‘falsely’ experience their lives as products of unchangeable social nature.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the victims of capitalism are in denial because they are manipulated by the capitalist system to believe that there is no alternative.

The classical sociological explanation for this was that “people obey because they share certain common values and beliefs”—what Durkheim called the collective consciousness. People’s behavior and inclination to seemingly conform and simply accept their condition, even under the supposedly oppressive capitalist system, was motivated by a search for universal meaning and explanation for the ways of the world and one’s place in society.<sup>7</sup> The Frankfurt School thinkers saw the positivism of capitalist

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Agger. "Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance." *Annual Review of Sociology* 17 (1992), 108.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

ideology as indicative of the Enlightenment and classical liberalism's limitations. The attempts of Enlightenment thinkers to demystify religion and to promote a scientific approach to knowledge were grounded in positivism and were thus not sufficient to achieve a true state of objectivism.<sup>8</sup> It might appear that the conflict I have identified is not so much between the traditionalists and the moderns as it is within the various factions of modern liberal and progressive thought – between the classical liberals, the Marxists, the Frankfurt School, and the feminists. However, even within modern liberal and progressive thought, there are more and less radical notions of freedom and its relation to “essence.” Durkheim's notion of collective consciousness helps us to understand how we might conceive of freedom as perfection of essence in the modern context: assuming there are, as Durkheim claims, “a set of shared beliefs, ideas and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society,” which might constitute a sort of human essence, then the effort to express, understand, or analyze these aspects would be the pursuit of freedom as perfection of essence.

In order to escape the constraints of these notions, the Frankfurt School's critical theorists attempted “to develop a mode of consciousness and cognition that breaks the identity of reality and rationality, viewing social facts not as inevitable constraints on human freedom but as pieces of history that can be changed.”<sup>9</sup> It is in this that we can see the idea of a liberation from essence point of view: the idea that there is no grand narrative, no singular purpose or meaning, only conditions and constructions that can be changed and revolutionized in order to reach an authentic state of freedom. Agger

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 109.



connects poststructuralism and postmodernism to critical theory by emphasizing their similar aversion to positivist definitions and categories. He defines poststructuralism as a theory of knowledge and language, while defining postmodernism as an analogous theory of society, culture, and history.<sup>10</sup> Agger echoes Lyotard's conception of a postmodern social theory that "would refuse the totalizing claims of grand narratives like Marxism that attempt to identify axial structural principles explaining all manner of disparate social phenomena."<sup>11</sup>

In the second chapter, I present a brief history on the American feminist movement, focused primarily on the 1960s to the present. The purpose of this chapter is to trace the evolution of some of the fundamental feminist ideas and to gain a better understanding of the nature of the movement in its current iteration. This chapter contains both historical descriptions of the feminist movement and concrete examples of the liberation from essence feminist mindset as I define it in this thesis. In the third chapter, I argue that feminism in academia is influenced by the postmodern condition and by poststructuralist philosophy, as coterminous movements, and in doing so I evaluate several current attempts by feminist philosophers to address this issue. Part of the difficulty of this thesis is that it involves defining several sweeping terms that can be used to describe a variety of ideas and groups. For the sake of clarity, my focus is on so-called "second-wave" contemporary American feminism, and I will use categories of feminism, as defined by well-regarded feminist scholars, to differentiate between particular schools of feminist thought. These scholars are Christina Hoff Sommers, who has pioneered the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 116.

more conservative notion of freedom feminism, and Linda Alcoff, a feminist philosopher, who identified two primary categories of modern feminist: the cultural feminists and the poststructuralist feminists. In this chapter, I break the analysis into two realms: the influence of postmodernism in addressing theoretical issues in feminist philosophy, and the influence of postmodernism on feminist pedagogy in university and educational settings.

In the fourth chapter, I argue that the link between feminism and postmodernism weakens the feminist cause, based on the flawed liberation from essence theory, and I will demonstrate this using a theoretical framework from cognitive sociology. In contrast to the previous chapter, the focus of this chapter is on feminism's role in the public sphere. There are multiple "dissident" feminists such as Camille Paglia and Christina Hoff Sommers whose attempts to dissent from the party line have resulted in attacks and attempts at censorship by their supposed peers. A full examination of the feminist marketplace of ideas will help to illustrate the strand of postmodern thinking that I wish to critique in the feminist movement, and it will also illuminate the alternative approaches to feminism that I hope to examine and highlight.

I evaluate feminism as a "thought community," drawing on Eviatar Zerubavel's concept to demonstrate that the movement in its current iteration is limiting itself to a radical postmodern notion that is incompatible with more traditional or even classical liberal conceptions of freedom and equality. Zerubavel, a pioneer of cognitive sociology, argues that the traditional approaches to studying cognition—cognitive individualism and cognitive universalism—are not sufficient. Recognizing the limitations of cognitive

individualism, which emphasizes subjectivity and personal experiences and sees humans as thinking primarily as individuals, Zerubavel also criticizes the attachment to cognitive universalism. He claims that cognitive universalism and its concern with how we think as human beings prevents cognitive scientists from studying the major cognitive differences that do not arise from fundamental biological differences. These two approaches, while useful, ignore the social dimension of cognition.

Zerubavel sees cognitive sociology as a way to avoid the reductionism that is common when approaching cognition. His understanding of the value of cognitive sociology is that “in highlighting the social aspects of cognition, cognitive sociology reminds us that we think not only as individuals and as human beings, but also as social beings, products of particular social environments that affect as well as constrain the way we cognitively interact with the world.”<sup>12</sup> This discipline can be traced in part to Karl Mannheim, who said “it is not isolated individuals who do the thinking, but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thought...strictly speaking it is incorrect to say that the single individual thinks. Rather it is more correct to insist that he participates in thinking further what other men have thought before him.”<sup>13</sup>

In order to better describe the social dimension of cognition, Zerubavel posits the idea of thought communities as the areas of influence that are larger than the individual but smaller than the entire human race. Thought communities could be churches, professions, nations, or political and ideological schools. It follows from this conception

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<sup>12</sup>Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

of cognition that just because we commonly share certain “mindscapes” does not mean that they are naturally or logically inevitable. Cognitive sociology enables us to study thought communities in a more nuanced way because it “helps us avoid the danger of regarding the merely conventional as if it were part of the natural order by specifically highlighting that which is not entirely subjective yet at the same time not entirely objective either.”<sup>14</sup> This approach is particularly useful for studying feminism and its relationship to postmodernism, as there are concerns about this coming out of the feminist academic community itself, with feminist scholars raising concerns about the way feminism as a school of thought constructs its knowledge. Linda Alcoff asked a particularly apt question:

Why is a right-wing woman's consciousness constructed via social discourse but a feminist's consciousness not? Poststructuralist critiques of subjectivity pertain to the construction of all subjects or they pertain to none. And here is precisely the dilemma for feminists: How can we ground a feminist politics that deconstructs the female subject? Nominalism threatens to wipe out feminism itself.<sup>15</sup>

This question speaks to the root of the problem and ties in nicely with Zerubavel’s theory - any thought community, ideology, or group is equally subject to the constraints of subjectivity and construction. For one particular ideology, such as feminism, to claim that it is not, is particularly threatening not just to its own cause but also to anyone who is deemed to fall outside of its approval.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Linda Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” in *Feminism and Philosophy: Essential Readings in Theory, Reinterpretation and Application*, ed. Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong (Boulder: San Francisco, 1995), 12.

Zerubavel is also useful as an observer of postmodernism as a thought community with its own “style” of organizing the world in the mind. Echoing the ideas of aesthetic theorists, he filters their observations through the lens of cognitive sociology:

The works of Cummings, Joyce, Picasso, Pirandello, and Mondrian are distinctively modern. So, of course, are glass architecture, multinational corporations, and the Internet...Indeed, we might think of them as different manifestations of a single, unmistakably fuzzy-minded vision of the world...What distinctively characterized the modern (as well as the ‘postmodern’) way of thinking, ‘is not just another redrawing of the cultural map—the moving of a few disputed borders...but an alteration of the principles of mapping. Something is happening to the way we think about the way we think.’<sup>16</sup>

Finally, I conclude this thesis by offering an alternative – and hopefully more productive - version of feminism that addresses the weaknesses engendered by the postmodern influence and the constraints revealed by a cognitive sociological analysis.

## Chapter 1

### **From Aesthetics to Ideology: The Twentieth Century Postmodern Condition**

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<sup>16</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscales: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, 6.

*"Personally, I am not greatly interested in what is said about art. But, if I had to give an opinion, I would put it this way: everything that has a sense of humanity, a sense of modernity, is interesting; everything that lacks these is worthless."* –Edouard Manet

With Edouard Manet and his fellow nineteenth-century Impressionist painters, including Monet, Degas, and Cezanne, the groundwork was laid for the conventions and ideals of Modernism to fully blossom in the twentieth century. The Impressionists certainly represented a break from tradition: they painted still lives and landscapes; they delved into the cognitive aspect of art, painting what they saw *en plein air*; they captured candid moments of ordinary lives. Despite their radicalism, however, the Impressionists were classically trained, and as a distinct movement, its members adhered to standards of technique and form; furthermore, the movement is considered a defensive response to the invention of photographs and cameras. Manet's statement reveals the tender balance that the Impressionists clung to: their radical tendencies contrasted with their adherence to standards and resistance to change. In Manet's world, humanity and modernity were intertwined and existed perhaps only in relation to each other - the Impressionists' radical approaches to art paid homage to the past in their attempts to reconcile the limitation of the traditional medium, paint, with the modern demand for candidness and sensation.

It is difficult now to imagine a member of the modernist legacy making such a statement - first to posit such a close relationship between humanity and modernity, then to attach intrinsic value to such a relationship. Manet's musings seem almost naïve considering the ways the modernist movement manifested itself and eventually gave way to the postmodernist movement in the twentieth-century aesthetic sphere. This twentieth-century postmodernism, primarily an aesthetic theory, has permeated the academic realm,

with significant implications for the evolution of social and political thought both inside and outside the confines of academia. Jean-Francois Lyotard captures the meaning and scope of postmodernism, claiming, “the word is in current use on the American continent among sociologists and critics; it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules of science, literature, and the arts.”<sup>17</sup> This definition of the term is key in understanding the ways in which postmodern ideas exist in intellectual spheres and permeate many aspects of culture, academia, and policy. That Lyotard refers to postmodernism as a condition of a society, specifically the highly developed American society, is indicative of its scope and complexity. Signorelli and Salingaros also observe the extent to which postmodernism is entrenched in Western society: “Standing behind this aesthetic is an ideology supported by nearly the entire institutional structure of the Western world - the universities, the publishing houses, the galleries, the journals, the prize committees, the zoning boards.”<sup>18</sup> It therefore is crucial to understand the roots of postmodernism and the postmodern cultural and intellectual condition if we are to properly understand the social and political changes that accompanied it.

Postmodernism gained traction as a set of theories connected by “their demotion of reason, their radical epistemological relativism, their dismissal of or representing as inaccessible social and historical reality, and their undeniable political pessimism.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, xxiii.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Signorelli and Nikos Salingaros, “The Tyranny of Artistic Modernism.”

<sup>19</sup> Michael Rectenwald, "Postmodernism, the Academic Left, and the Crisis of Capitalism," *Insurgent Notes Journal of Communist Theory and Practice* 8 (2013).

Broadly speaking, these theories were a reaction to and rejection of the Enlightenment and its appeal to rationality and human progress as well as any traditional idea of a complex world order or human nature. Embedded in this criticism is the key concept of “master narratives” - tools of oppression that are used to shape social and political structures in grand and all-encompassing ways. Such narratives, endemic in the West, are designed by those in power to maintain the hegemony of the dominant class - as defined by economic class, gender, and other demographic characteristics - over the oppressed Other.

As explained by Frederick Turner in his essay *Epic Arts*, “One of the major theories of the postmodern movement held that our political, juridical and economic lives were governed by social and cultural “grand narratives” or “master narratives...The disciplines of the arts and crafts, the forces of advertising and popular culture, even the natural sciences, were “social constructions,” reinforcing “logocentric,” “Eurocentric” or “phallogocentric” regimes of power and knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> The task of postmodernists, then, was not to modify or alter the narratives; rather, their mission was the circumlocution or destruction of the narratives entirely. This perpetual process of destruction is a defining aspect of postmodernism: there must always be some other system or structure that needs to be extirpated. Turner describes the modern period (and the postmodernism that followed) as “the moment when the destruction of grand narratives came to be valued for itself rather than for the better system that could replace it,” a contrast to the traditional

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<http://insurgentnotes.com/2013/03/postmodernism-the-academic-left-and-the-crisis-of-capitalism/>.

<sup>20</sup> Frederick Turner, “Epic Arts.” *American Arts Quarterly* 26 (2009), 23.



imperative which was “always to find some new story that would do the good and valuable things the old story had done, while avoiding the old story’s clumsiness, irrationality, narrowness or injustice.”<sup>21</sup> The postmodern imperative can be seen as an attempt to break free or become liberated from the grand narratives; in contrast, the traditional imperative was to perfect or improve upon these narratives.

This attempt to break from traditional narrative forms played out quite radically in the aesthetic sphere, as the twentieth century ushered in major changes in the vocabularies and theories of visual art, architecture, music, and literature. James Wilson describes these changes critically in his essay *Unleashed from the Exemplar*:

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the visual, musical and poetic arts each suffered related but distinct revolutions. Arnold Schoenberg introduced atonality, or serialism, a new musical vocabulary to replace melody...Visual artists...experimented with Cubist and other techniques that attempted to represent formal qualities abstracted from the lush profusion of everyday appearance. This led to painting and sculpture of pure form, which ceased to derive evidently from forms found in nature.<sup>22</sup>

In this description, Schoenberg’s attempt to replace melody and Cubism’s avoidance of natural forms represent revolts against the narratives of tradition and hegemony. These efforts were interpreted and championed by critics who saw human life and its byproducts, including art, as unstable and impermanent. Critics of the early twentieth century such as T.E. Hulme “sought to limit the appearance of time’s effects in artwork;

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> James Matthew Wilson, “Unleashed from the Exemplar: The Fate of Narrative in Modern Art.” *American Arts Quarterly* 26 (2009), 40.

[Clive] Bell eviscerates the artwork of every sort of content. Form alone remains.”<sup>23</sup>

Clive Bell, an English critic active during the early twentieth century, was a proponent of formalism, the view that the formal properties of a piece of art are the only things that make it art. According to formalist theory, art’s aesthetic value is not derived from what it represents, the context in which the object was made, or the intention of its creator. Of the deeper meaning or symbolism one might find in art, Bell claimed,

Representation is a sign of weakness in an artist. A painter too feeble to create forms that provoke more than a little aesthetic emotion will try to eke that little out by suggesting the emotions of life. To evoke the emotions of life he must use representation... But if in the artist an inclination to play upon the emotions of life is often the sign of a flickering inspiration, in the spectator a tendency to seek, behind form, the emotions of life is a sign of defective sensibility always.<sup>24</sup>

Bell and his peers saw the “emotions of life” as unnecessary if not damaging to understanding art, and criticized both artists and spectators who sought such meaning in art. The idea that the viewer is not supposed to ascribe any tangible meaning or worldly significance to art is the truly radical notion of postmodernism—the idea that such art can and should operate outside of the human reality. These are the foundational ideas of artistic postmodernism, and reflect some of its more abstract and seemingly intangible aspects.

It is clear from this understanding of postmodern theoretical concepts that in order for these ideas to gain traction, artists and spectators had to break completely from traditional narratives, conventions, and techniques. The effect of their implementation in

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>24</sup> Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Capricorn, 1958).  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16917/16917-h/16917-h.htm>.

art and music is that “aesthetics as a philosophy itself becomes abstract and narrow. The concepts of representation or mimesis...become a matter of indifference. The effect...was to silence the natural act of interpretation that begins with and extends beyond narrative content.”<sup>25</sup> This silencing, however, is considered by some to be limited in its effectiveness. The basis for this critique is that human nature contains some sort of essential interpretive drive that pieces the parts into a whole, assigning meaning and purpose to otherwise unexplainable events, items, and ideas. It is impossible to escape from this type of response to narrative: French phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur argued that time and narrative are the very conditions of human life. Not only is it impossible to escape these conditions, but also it is impossible to think outside of them.<sup>26</sup> Postmodernism, in denying the existence of these essential conditions of humanity, denies the interpreter any right to interpret. It enforces silence, leaving the interpreter able only to observe the form of the painting, poem, or music. As Wilson quips, “Form is significant, but what does it signify? What does it say? It says itself, like breath without words.”<sup>27</sup> More important than postmodernist theory itself, however, is where the projects and works of postmodern thinkers and artists lead. What is the effect of such extreme abstraction on the quality and content of music, literature, art, and architecture?

One answer is that the implementation of these theories in the aesthetic sphere has led to abstraction with primarily destructive effects. As Wilson describes it, “Such poets used collage and fragmentation to disrupt the formation of words into language, in hopes

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<sup>25</sup> James Matthew Wilson, “Unleashed from the Exemplar: The Fate of Narrative in Modern Art,” 42.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 43.

of escaping the “capitalist” and “colonial” “prison house” of discourse...these poets use only two tropes: the representation of debased commercialized language and the liberated language of nonsense.”<sup>28</sup> This culmination in nonsense is considered the natural endpoint of such experiments, primarily because the constraints of time and narrative cannot be escaped. The concept of time, beginnings and ends, is not a social construct or a subjective experience - it is a reality. Any attempt to end or operate outside of master narratives, then, is futile because such an effort is in itself articulating a narrative.

Given these limitations, it is not surprising that one of the major criticisms of postmodern theories such as Bell’s is that they deny the reality and significance of time - beginnings, ends, and the nature of life itself - in dictating how we interpret and experience everything, including art. It is the nature of time and the finitude of life, according to critics, that gives our creations emotional meaning. As expressed by Wilson,

The metaphysical error of these otherwise rich claims lies in their locating the “categorical imperative” to narrate within the subjectivity of the person, rather than in the nature of reality as such. We are forced to think in terms of time not because of some condition of our consciousness, but simply because time is a reality...The inevitable reality of everything in time is a beginning and an end. This finitude of things makes them intrinsically dramatic.<sup>29</sup>

Bell’s aesthetic theory operates outside the concept of narratives or any sort of universal meaning or understanding, and instead argues that the great works of art have only in common their “significant form.”

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

He further extrapolates: “What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto’s frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cezanne? Only one answer seems possible - significant form.”<sup>30</sup> By significant form, Bell means that there are particular combinations of colors, line, and space that will universally provoke aesthetic emotions; it is the only essential quality that allows the spectator to distinguish art from everything else.

Bell seems to have anticipated the criticism that would be made by future philosophers, those who probingly ask why certain forms or techniques mean more than others, with the obvious answer being that there are certain essential qualities of art that resonate in the human mind and certain qualities that do not. However, he deems the criticism irrelevant:

Also at this point a query arises, irrelevant indeed, but hardly to be suppressed: “Why are we so profoundly moved by forms related in a particular way?” The question is extremely interesting, but irrelevant to aesthetics. In pure aesthetics we have only to consider our emotion and its object: for the purposes of aesthetics we have no right, neither is there any necessity, to pry behind the object into the state of mind of him who made it.<sup>31</sup>

Bell’s emphasis on the subjectivity of experience and interpretation, and his criticism of art that attempts to represent or describe, is especially significant considering the context in which he was writing. As a witness of the industrial revolution and scientific modernization, Bell saw first-hand the myriad ways in which society was rapidly

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<sup>30</sup> Clive Bell, *Art*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

changing. Perhaps most relevant to his focus on aesthetics is the invention of the camera and the increasing use and popularity of photography. His place in the midst of these changes perhaps motivated him to differentiate theoretically between paintings that function as “interesting and amusing” documents - much the way photographs do - and a true work of art.<sup>32</sup>

In the introduction to Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, Frederic Jameson extrapolates on this concept:

...we are now in a position to think or conceptualize scientific research in a very different way from the Newtonian period...this “break” now links up with the other thematics of Lyotard’s essay by way of an event generally taken primarily to be an aesthetic one, although it has relatively immediate philosophical and ideological analogues: I am referring to the so-called crisis of representation, in which an essential epistemology, which conceives of representation as the reproduction, for subjectivity, of an objectivity that lies outside it...<sup>33</sup>

It is clear from Jameson’s remarks, written in the late twentieth century, that the postmodern conception of representation, narrative, and essence still exists in the contemporary mind.

Lyotard articulates an understanding of narratives that sheds light on how they are viewed in the postmodern school of thought. He explains, “Narratives, as we have seen, determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, viii.

they do.”<sup>34</sup> Postmodern artists, writers, and thinkers, then, aimed to operate outside of this narrative mindset. This idea certainly manifested itself in visual art as early as the era in which Bell and the Cubists were at work. However, critics of the movement and its theoretical basis point out how these ideas played out and evolved over the course of the twentieth century: “The early modes of abstraction, such as Cubism, at most lessened the usual dependence on narrative as a source of subject matter for representation. But early abstraction set the stage for a radicalization severing visual form tout court from any narrative origin, and this radicalization became the main tradition of modern visual art.”<sup>35</sup> Wilson observes that while the initial ideas comprising modernism in art were not extremely radical and did not truly mark a break from traditional artistic technique or inspiration, over the long-term they served to create an entirely new and seemingly paradoxical tradition out of revolt against and abstraction of tradition. Wilson continues in his critique of the postmodern tradition, arguing, “Modernist artworks, especially at the thought-silencing extremes of abstraction, have themselves become characters in the story of art, no more “liberated” from the conditions of time and narrative than their predecessors. This is a detour in the historical practice of art, the classical understanding of the fine arts as poesis, the making of plots.”<sup>36</sup> This criticism is rooted in two assumptions: first, the understanding of human existence as defined at least in part by its finitude and temporal nature; second, the belief that in order to derive meaning or

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>35</sup> James Matthew Wilson, “Unleashed from the Exemplar: The Fate of Narrative in Modern Art,” 41.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 40.

understanding from art, we are not only inclined to but are bound to interpret it in relation to its narrative and chronological properties.

The argument in favor of this view is both cognitive and philosophical, and one's understanding probably has implications for whether or not one can sympathize with postmodernism or agree with Wilson. Wilson echoes the sentiments of many other critics and thinkers, who further extrapolate on the paradox of postmodernism by identifying the pervasiveness of the narrative in our most basic functioning as humans: "Thought and life alike resolve themselves in narrative terms. We might punctuate this phenomenological claim with an ideological one. Frederic Jameson has argued in Marxist terms that narratives may be false, but they are no less ineluctable. To speak of an end to "master narratives" is itself to articulate a narrative."<sup>37</sup> It is this postmodern anti-narrative narrative and its influence on the contemporary public sphere that are particularly fascinating.

Signorelli and Salingaros touched on one of the major themes found in criticisms of postmodern theory. They describe postmodernism as "the misunderstanding of freedom as liberation from essence rather than perfection of essence."<sup>38</sup> This dichotomy, revealed in postmodern aesthetic theory, can also be found at work in other postmodern intellectual and political realms. In particular, it is interesting to consider whether and how the dominance of the liberation from essence ideal impacted the American feminist movement. Given the critiques of this specific theory and postmodernism more generally,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Signorelli and Nikos Salingaros, "The Tyranny of Artistic Modernism."



it is necessary to consider the impact that the postmodern way of knowing has had on coextensive movements such as feminism, both in the academic and public spheres.

Feminism in its current iteration rose to prominence with postmodernism and poststructuralism, and many leading feminist intellectuals of the late twentieth century were also philosophers, linguists, or literary theorists. Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Julia Kristeva all stand out as pioneers of the intellectual sphere of contemporary feminism. In the public sphere, women such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem translated and applied the postmodern ideas of the more radical intellectual feminists into compelling calls to action with more mainstream appeal to the average woman. While it would be a challenge to prove a direct link between Betty Friedan's efforts or Simone de Beauvoir's ideas and Clive Bell's theories on formalism or Picasso's Cubism, the primary purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate the broader condition of society in which all of these thinkers, artists, and writers were working, and to provide concrete examples of this abstract condition so that it might be better understood when applied to a study of the feminist movement.

Zerubavel's insights are particularly useful in better understanding societal dynamics that are distinctly postmodern: in describing the modern (and postmodern) worldview, he explains, "A fuzzy-minded vision of the world is quite evident in the general modern aversion to conventional social divisions. Such an aversion is manifested in the movement towards racial desegregation, in the explicitly feminist effort to 'degenderize' human relations, as well as in the relentless Marxist attempt to create a

classless society.”<sup>39</sup> This description also helps to explain the connection between modern and postmodern art and the societal conditions they created: “Such an essentially fuzzy-minded view can also be seen in modern design, as evident from the modern fascination with glass, which basically blurs the fundamental distinction between inside and outside by allowing them to visually interpenetrate each other.”<sup>40</sup> By understanding the difference in style and meaning between an eighteenth-century portrait by John Singleton Copley and a twentieth-century Picasso, and the cultural conditions under which these diametrically different styles came to be appreciated, one can gain an understanding of the broader cultural conditions under which leaders in other realms of twentieth century society were operating. In the following chapter, the link between these sweeping cultural conditions and the social and political movements they engendered will become evident in my discussion of feminist history and the development of the liberation from essence ideology within broader feminist thought.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 134.

## Chapter Two

### A Brief History of American Feminism and Its Evolution Towards A Liberation from Essence Mindset

Before delving into the political and social theories that underlie contemporary feminist discourse, it is first necessary to review the history and struggles of the feminist movement and the political context in which it arose. Having context in terms of the people, events, and ideas involved is vital if we are to effectively understand the movement from a theoretical standpoint. The second wave of feminism, beginning around 1960, is the movement that has come to dominate in the minds of most Americans and is responsible for the notions that occupy most American cultural and academic institutions. Legislative progress, in the form of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 with its Title VII prohibition of sex discrimination in hiring and promotion, laid the groundwork for a late twentieth century feminist revival.<sup>41</sup> Betty Friedan, a Smith graduate and frustrated housewife herself, capitalized on the turning tides by identifying discrimination and a dearth of opportunities for women as the source of the frustration in her life and in the lives of many other educated, middle-class wives and mothers. Friedan successfully published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 to a receptive audience of other frustrated housewives, going on to found the National Organization for Women (NOW) with the goal of eliminating discrimination against

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<sup>41</sup> Christina Hoff Sommers, *Freedom Feminism: Its Surprising History and Why It Matters Today (Values and Capitalism)*, (Washington: AEI Press, 2013), 42.

women. NOW featured women from across the political spectrum, including women of both political parties who had lead the efforts to pass the Equal Pay Act and Title VII.<sup>42</sup>

However, the movement began to face significant challenges when the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was re-introduced. Prominent feminist and leader of the National Women's Party (NWP), Alice Paul, first introduced the ERA to Congress in 1923. The impetus for introducing such an amendment arose shortly after the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, prohibiting any United States citizen from being denied the right to vote on the basis of sex, was passed in August of 1920. Paul and her fellow NWP members felt compelled to find a new issue to address after they had accomplished their initial goals, so shortly after the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified, "the NWP began planning a large convention at which its members would decide whether to continue as a group, and, if so, what to work for."<sup>43</sup> When the convention was held six months later, chairman Alice Paul ignored other suggestions and fully endorsed "an ongoing program to 'remove all remaining forms of the subjection of women,' by means of elimination of sex discrimination in law."<sup>44</sup> The ERA was immediately a source of contention and disagreement not only between feminists and anti-feminists, but also within feminist groups. The amendment, which states "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex," was deemed particularly threatening to unions and blue collar workers.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>43</sup> Nancy F. Cott, "Historical Perspectives: The Equal Rights Amendment Conflict in the 1920s," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, edited by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 46.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

In response to the perceived threat, significant opposition to the amendment arose as early as 1922, when the National Consumer's League, the League of Women Voters, and the Women's Trade Union League all went on record "opposing 'blanket' equal rights bills, as the NWP formulations at both the state and federal levels were called."<sup>45</sup> These critics' concerns - that a constitutional amendment of this sort was "too indiscriminating an instrument" and that "objectionable sex discriminations such as those concerning jury duty, inheritance rights, nationality, or child custody would be more efficiently and accurately eliminated by specific bills for specific instances" - were significant and not without merit.<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, similar sentiments arose once again when the second wave feminists attempted to re-introduce the ERA several decades later.

By 1971, the ERA had passed the House with an almost unanimous vote, and by March 1972 it had passed in the Senate by a vote of 84-8.<sup>47</sup> Soon, dozens of states began to ratify the ERA, in the midst of little opposition from politicians or the press. However, as with the first attempt to ratify the amendment, there were prominent critics, and Phyllis Schlafly, a conservative Catholic mother, wife, and lawyer, was at the helm of the anti-ERA movement. Schlafly took up the anti-ERA cause after casually reading some materials on the amendment as well as various legal arguments against it, ultimately leading one of the most notorious and successful campaigns in recent political history.

One of the crucial errors of the pro-ERA movement, both in the 1920s and again in the 1960s and 1970s, was a focus on women as a singular group who would perceive

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Christina Hoff Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 46.

their interests as solely tied to their gender: “The NWP posited that women could and would perceive self-interest in ‘purely’ gender terms. Faced by female opponents, its leaders imagined a fictive or abstract unity among women rather than attempt to encompass women’s real diversity.”<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the opposition movements in both instances saw an opportunity gain more mainstream appeal. Phyllis Schlafly saw in the ERA revival the same dynamic at work again, and was able to craft a movement that mimicked the anti-ERA efforts of the 1920s by looking “at women as members of families - daughters, wives, mothers, and widows with family responsibilities” and recognizing that the “promise of ‘mere equality’ did not sufficiently take those relationships into account.”<sup>49</sup>

However, Schlafly’s concerns were not solely related to women’s equality, racial, or labor issues, as was the case in the 1920s. Instead, she noted the many measures already taken to promote women’s equality, including the Equal Pay Act, Title VII, and countless court victories.<sup>50</sup> Schlafly was concerned about the subtler, underlying potential purposes of the ERA to actually cause harm to women and to radically change social and cultural mores. She saw it as “a blueprint for a radically new society,” according to Christina Hoff Sommers.<sup>51</sup> Schlafly’s peers, such as Betty Friedan, were highly critical of women in the domestic sphere, going so far as to “attack a postwar culture that consigned women to the domestic sphere,” also attacking “the domestic sphere itself and the women

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<sup>48</sup> Nancy F. Cott, “Historical Perspectives: The Equal Rights Amendment Conflict in the 1920s,” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, 48.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

<sup>50</sup> Christina Hoff Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 49.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

who chose to live there.”<sup>52</sup> Schlafly was able to gain traction with her anti-ERA argument by pointing out that many women’s rights issues had already been addressed through previous legislation. While she seemingly had no qualms with these previous efforts, she saw something different about the ERA effort: something much more radical that would be overlooked by the majority of politicians, who were not going to object to an otherwise innocuous amendment that would surely score them political points among a key constituency.

These issues came to light when Schlafly debated NOW representative Ann Scott on William F. Buckley Jr.’s television show *Firing Line*. In the debate, Schlafly laid out her claims: that “the ERA was not about women’s rights, but imposing an eccentric agenda on an unsuspecting nation.”<sup>53</sup> She cited the possibility that the amendment could be used to require state-funded abortion, elimination of all forms of “gender segregation,” such as single-sex schools, and that women could be subject to the draft. While Buckley expected Ann Scott to refute Schlafly’s points, she instead agreed with them and declared that they were good things, claiming, “There is no question that if the ERA is passed women would become subject to the draft....If women are to be citizens, and citizens are to be subject to the draft, then women should take the responsibilities as well as the rights of citizenship.”<sup>54</sup> It was clear from this debate that the NOW-driven ERA campaign was not quite as moderate as they had made it seem – and perhaps there was a shred of truth in Schlafly’s so-called extremist protests.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 53.

As Hoff Sommers writes, “Schlafly was certain that members of Congress and state legislatures had not meant to ratify Betty Freidan’s angry worldview or NOW’s increasingly radical agenda. She saw clearly that the amendment could be used in ways never dreamed of by its congressional supporters. The goal was radical egalitarianism.”<sup>55</sup> While Schlafly was highly successful in her anti-ERA efforts - by highlighting the controversial and contentious aspects of the ERA movement, she drew out the increasingly radical arguments of NOW and other ERA supporters and ultimately halted the passage of the amendment - the radical feminists were not willing to give up.<sup>56</sup>

Not surprisingly, those in the pro-ERA group were not pleased to have someone as effective as Schlafly working against their cause. They viewed her actions quite negatively and thought that Schlafly was only successful because “she reached out to vulnerable women and played brilliantly on cultural anxieties.”<sup>57</sup> To this day, Schlafly remains vilified by feminists for her anti-ERA efforts and right-wing views. One recent *Jezebel* headline read, “Phyllis Schlafly is Still a Cranky Asshole Who Doesn’t Get It,” and the article went on to heavily criticize one of her most recent books.<sup>58</sup> Even more prominently, and indicative of the depth of negative sentiment harbored against Schlafly, feminist students and faculty at Washington University in St. Louis, Schlafly’s alma mater, launched a nation-wide protest against the university’s decision to bestow an

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>57</sup> Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century’s End*, (New York: Free Press, 2003), 113.

<sup>58</sup> Tracie Egan Morrissey, “Phyllis Schlafly is Still A Cranky Asshole Who Doesn’t Get It,” *Jezebel*, February 23, 2011.

<http://jezebel.com/5768299/phyllis-schlafly-is-still-a-cranky-asshole-who-doesnt-get-it>



Honorary Doctorate upon her in 2008. The director of the school's Women's and Gender Studies program, Mary Ann Dzuback, spoke for many of Schlafly's critics, claiming, "The university has completely disregarded the concerns about anybody who cares about full and equal rights for women, who cares about the intellectual quality of feminist debate, and who cares about women's desire to enter the work force."<sup>59</sup> Clearly, Schlafly's impact on political discourse and her role in halting feminist efforts should not be underestimated, especially as a force for galvanizing the feminist movement in the aftermath of the failure of the ERA.

Though the campaign ended by the summer of 1982, the second wave of feminist ideology and its movement for "radical egalitarianism" was far from dead: the failure of the ERA helped to create an environment in which "the zeal of feminists was fed in equal parts by their optimism that an egalitarian world was possible and by the hostility and derision they met at every turn."<sup>60</sup> As Hoff Sommers explains via historian Jane Mansbridge, "by the mid-seventies most feminist leaders held that 'the ERA would require the military to send women draftees into combat on the same basis as men.' They did so, she says, 'because their ideology called for full equality with men, not for equality with exceptions.'"<sup>61</sup> In response to the failure of the ERA, the feminist movement became increasingly focused on complete and total equality as the highest moral good, without regard for other considerations, such as what type of society or culture would

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<sup>59</sup> Scott Jaschik, "Is Phyllis Schlafly Worthy of a Doctorate?" *Inside Higher Ed*, May 5, 2008. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/05/05/schlafly>

<sup>60</sup> Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, 39.

<sup>61</sup> Christina Hoff Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 57.

result if any causes of inequality in any realm - whether natural or artificial - were eliminated. Instead of asking why so many men and women were put off by the ERA's potential uses, or why so many people do not identify as feminists, the leaders of the feminist movement, in both the public sphere and in academia, have simply turned to increasingly convoluted and radical explanations for their observations and grievances.

This response, beginning with second wave feminism in the 1960s and evolving into third wave feminism throughout the late 1980s to the present, defines freedom as liberation from essence in a uniquely postmodern way. This more radical turn was in part made out of necessity: if the majority of women do not want radical egalitarianism and legislation such as the ERA, then surely there must be some larger social force at work, something that is keeping the masses from seeing the light. If women do not respond to the call for "liberation," then the more pressing underlying issues, whatever they are, must be addressed: as Sara Evans explains, "Many New Left activists came to believe that American society was not salvageable and required a total transformation."<sup>62</sup>

In the midst of this shift, the feminist climate became increasingly intolerant to any dissent. In her book on the history of modern feminism, Evans characterized the shift as a "search for purity" and for a "'true' feminism in the realm of ideas and the formula for a perfectly realized feminist life. The pursuit of perfection made it difficult to entertain complexity, sliding easily into dogmatism. Differences of opinion and lifestyle betrayed the "true faith" and could not be tolerated."<sup>63</sup> There are countless examples of this type of rhetoric - which I would categorize as "liberation from essence" feminism -

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<sup>62</sup> Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End*, 133.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

revealing the abstract and radical notions that were increasingly influencing the mainstream feminist movement.

In an excerpt from her personal diary, published in *Conflicts in Feminism*, Ann Snitow expresses her hopes that the feminist movement would allow her to escape from womanhood. In one instance, she recalls a conversation in which one of her friends asked “How can someone who doesn’t like being a woman be a feminist?” to which Snitow replied, “Why would anyone who likes being a woman need to be a feminist?”<sup>64</sup> She continues, expressing in joyful and almost histrionic terms, her realization that “Now I don’t have to be a woman anymore. I need never become a mother. Being a woman has always been humiliating, but I used to assume there was no exit. Now the very idea of ‘woman’ is up for grabs. ‘Woman’ is my slave name; feminism will give me freedom to seek some other identity altogether.”<sup>65</sup> The views of Snitow and her peers represent the most poignant and extreme examples of the feminist liberation from essence thought. Clearly, Snitow’s version of feminism goes beyond a desire for equal-pay laws or the right to vote - she equates her freedom with liberation not only from active discrimination, but also from any biological or cultural expectations or restrictions.

It is not surprising that such a view would also enable one to argue that it is not only possible but that it would be ideal “for the biological difference to wither away as a basis for social organization, either by moving men and women toward some shared center (androgyny) or toward some experience of human variety in which biology is but

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<sup>64</sup> Ann Snitow, “A Gender Diary,” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, edited by Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

one small variable.”<sup>66</sup> It should be noted that underlying the liberation from essence mindset is the commonly accepted social scientific view that many behaviors and institutions are socially constructed. This belief and its incorporation into feminist thought is perhaps derived from one of the earliest feminist thinkers, Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote one of the founding books of feminism in 1792, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in which “she said what was new then and remains fresh, shocking, and doubtful to many now: that sex hierarchy - like ranks in the church and the army or like the then newly contested ascendancy of kings - was social, not natural.”<sup>67</sup> However, those embracing the liberation from essence view seem to take deconstruction a step further. In conceiving of gender roles and even gender as socially constructed, feminists such as Snitow can easily follow these ideas to their extremes and make the case for liberation from essence - if gender is not a real and absolute category, then there is no way to defend it, let alone impose specific gender rules and expectations on all human beings.

Simone de Beauvoir explored these ideas, rather controversially and with immense impact on feminist and postmodern thinking, in *The Second Sex*, published in 1948 in France and translated into English for American readers in 1952. It is difficult to do Beauvoir justice here, as the book is 700 pages long and but one of her many works, but there are countless examples in her work that reflect the liberation from essence mindset within feminist thought. She is famous for her line, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” and similar sentiments are found throughout *The Second Sex*:

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 28.

In the end woman escapes the iron grasp of the species by way of still another serious crisis; the phenomena of menopause, the inverse of puberty...woman is now delivered from the servitude imposed by her female nature...And what is more, she is no longer the prey of overwhelming forces; she is herself, she and her body are one. It is sometimes said that women of a certain age constitute a 'third sex,' and in truth while they are not males, they are no longer females. Often, indeed, this release from female physiology is expressed in a health, a balance, a vigor that they lacked before.<sup>68</sup>

Here, Beauvoir demonizes women's reproductive capabilities, describing them as harmful and as rendering women "servants" to their nature, and glorifies the experiences of women who are liberated from their biological reproductive capabilities and obligations. It is important to note here that Beauvoir, like Snitow, is not simply arguing for better maternity leave policies or government-subsidized day care programs to ease the burdens of working mothers; rather, she is positing an ideal in which women are not mothers at all, and construes the biologically-driven female experience as inherently discriminatory and harmful to women.

Such extreme and negative views about female biology and womanhood abound in feminist thought, and often posit a movement towards cultural, if not biological, androgyny, as a solution to the problem of gender. As Carolyn Heilbrun writes,

I believe that our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behavior can be freely chosen. The ideal toward which I believe we should move is best described by the term 'androgyny.' Androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), 31.

<sup>69</sup> Carolyn Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, (New York: Norton, 1993), x.

We see here again a reiteration of the belief that any traditional expectations or rules of propriety are merely constructed and function primarily as tools of oppression. The highest moral good in this world view is one in which individuals are encouraged and able to subjectively choose their identities and roles without regard for any purposes or systems outside of their own liberation and fulfillment. Heilbrun continues, “Androgyny suggests...a full range of experience open to individuals who may, as women, be aggressive, as men, tender; it suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without regard to propriety or custom.”<sup>70</sup> Susan Okin also goes so far as to claim that, “A just future would be one without gender. In its social structures and practices, one’s sex would have no more relevance than one’s eye color or the length of one’s toes,” reflecting the liberal ideal that one’s choices and autonomy should play a larger role in one’s identity than any predetermined genders or cultural roles. In envisioning such a gender-less future, however, Okin imagines one in which androgyny eliminates traditional biological and cultural expectations pertaining to childbirth or raising children: “No assumptions would be made about ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles; childbearing would be...conceptually separated from child rearing and other family responsibilities...”<sup>71</sup>

The views of feminist icon Shulamith Firestone are also revealing of the liberation from essence ideology and its place in the feminist movement. Firestone was a major leader in second and third wave radical feminism, and her ideas still have influence today. Firestone was adamant about the dangers of the traditional family structure - ideas

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, xi.

<sup>71</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 171.

that are reminiscent of Marxist collectivism. While these ideas are clearly quite radical, they represent the line of thinking that shapes poststructuralist feminist thought. In writing on the relationship between biological constraints and the exploitation of women, Firestone claims, “Unless revolution uproots the basic social organization, the biological family - the vinculum through which the psychology of power can always be smuggled - the tapeworm of exploitation will never be annihilated,” going so far as to claim that “pregnancy is barbaric.”<sup>72</sup> Here, Firestone is blatantly retaliating not only against feminine essence, but also against any sort of essence. It appears that she makes this connection specifically to essential characteristics assigned by society based on biological differences - an issue that is later on addressed by thinkers such as Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. Firestone went on to demand that, “The end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex distinction itself: genital difference between human beings would no longer matter culturally.”<sup>73</sup> It should be noted here that Firestone clearly thinks that identity differences, especially those based on biological differences, are socially constructed and subjective and prevent the formation of a totally equal society, which aligns closely with poststructuralist, egalitarian feminist views.

The rhetoric of the liberation from essence feminists exemplified here is damaging not only because of its misguided and unbalanced views on social and cultural values, but also because its propagators are convinced that they are right and that those

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<sup>72</sup> Susan Faludi. "Death of a Revolutionary." *New Yorker*. April 15, 2013.

[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/04/15/130415fa\\_fact\\_faludi?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2013/04/15/130415fa_fact_faludi?currentPage=all).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

who disagree must be disposed of or silenced. In Zerubavel's terms, the liberation from essence feminists are a thought community convinced that their views and ideas are "social facts." That these lines of thinking have become so prevalent and powerful in public and academic discourse is cause for concern, and I illustrate this phenomenon through further analysis of different schools of contemporary feminist thought and through several case studies.



## Chapter Three

### Flaws of Liberation from Essence Feminism in the Academic Sphere

#### THEORETICAL FLAWS

#### Christina Hoff Sommers: Freedom Feminism and Maternal Feminism

Philosopher and “dissident” feminist Christina Hoff Sommers has attempted to address some of the common conservative-leaning concerns with the feminist movement in her recent book, *Freedom Feminism*. Hoff Sommers has been highly criticized by mainstream feminists, primarily because of her defense of men and boys in response to what she perceives as unjust and discriminatory stereotypes and policies promoted by feminist and liberal thinkers and policymakers. Both Hoff Sommers’ work and her experience as part of the feminist movement provide insight on this topic, and I will examine her experiences as a dissident feminist in a case study in the next chapter.

She highlights in the beginning of the book that most Americans, including 70% of women, say, “no” when asked, “Are you a feminist?” What is it about feminism that makes American men and women skeptical? Hoff Sommers identifies the problem partially as a uniquely American preoccupation with the plight of women in developed nations with little regard for the considerably worse circumstances of most women in other parts of the world. She cites feminist playwright Eve Ensler, who claimed during a 2003 lecture at Harvard, “I think that the oppression of women is universal. We are bonded in every single place of the world. I think the conditions are exactly the same...the systematic global oppression of women is completely across the globe.”<sup>74</sup> She

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<sup>74</sup> Christina Hoff Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 3.

also mentions prominent feminist blogger Jessica Valenti, who claims, “We have no problem condemning atrocities done to women abroad, yet too many of us in the United States ignore the oppression on our doorstep. We’re suffering under the mass delusion that women in America have achieved equality...Part of this unwillingness to see misogyny in America could be self-protection - perhaps the truth is too scary to face.”<sup>75</sup> Hoff Sommers claims that it is prominent feminist leaders such as Valenti and Ensler who are responsible for the American public’s distaste for the term, by exaggerating the supposed suffering of Americans and dismissing in some ways the far worse struggles of women elsewhere. These views do not appeal to the average American woman, who likely would not see herself as “suffering under a mass delusion.”

However, Hoff Sommers also sees an opportunity to “reclaim” feminism by acknowledging its tremendous progress, especially in the United States, and by offering less radical and more common sense reasons to maintain a feminist movement. In doing so, she claims it is vital to understand how to preserve the freedom and equality that has been achieved, how to assist feminist leaders in other parts of the world, and to continue to address legitimate instances of violence and discrimination against women, even in the United States.<sup>76</sup> She conceptualizes her style of feminism “freedom feminism,” which stands for “the moral, social, and legal equality of the sexes” and “the freedom of women to employ their equal status to pursue happiness in their own distinctive ways.”<sup>77</sup> Hoff Sommers distinguishes freedom feminism from other schools of feminist thought by

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

emphasizing that it embraces masculinity and femininity, is not anti-capitalism, and does not view men's happiness and women's happiness as a zero-sum-game.<sup>78</sup> From this description, freedom feminism does not sound too controversial – it seems to strike a middle ground in a way that would appeal to most people, including both men and women. Also accurately described as equity feminism, Hoff Sommers' theory is fundamentally classical liberal in its principles, and might appeal to a more libertarian-minded person who values primarily negative liberties and encourages individuals to make their own informed choices, regardless of whether or not they agree with the choice.

Hoff Sommers also spends time defining her concept of a “maternal feminist,” a more traditional form of feminism, influential in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hoff Sommers laments the fact that Hannah More, who she sees as the founder of maternal feminism, has been all but forgotten by contemporary feminists and historians. As Hoff Sommers writes, “More initiated a humane revolution in the relations of the sexes that was decorous, civilized, and socially cohesive. Above all, it was a feminism that women themselves could comfortably embrace: a feminism that empowered and freed women on their own terms. Indeed if More's name and fame had not been airbrushed out of contemporary women's history, many today might identify with a modernized version of her female-friendly feminism.”<sup>79</sup> So why have hardly any modern Americans heard of Hannah More, let alone embraced her form of feminism? According to Anne Mellor, a UCLA literary scholar, “many of the leading scholars who

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>79</sup> Christina Hoff Sommers, *Freedom Feminism*, 24.

specialize on the eighteenth and nineteenth century are committed to ‘left-wing social ideologies,’” causing them to “hate Hannah More because in their eyes she did far too much to stop a liberating-French style of political revolution occurring in England.”<sup>80</sup> Hoff Sommers cites Marxist social historian E.P. Thompson as an example: Thompson “accused More of fear mongering and brainwashing the working class.”<sup>81</sup> She also cites literary scholar Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, representative of modern feminist theorists, who described More “as a case study of ‘patriarchal complicity’ and an ‘uninvited guest’ who ‘makes the process of celebrating our heritage as women more difficult.’”<sup>82</sup> This type of attitude displayed by contemporary feminists towards women who promote femininity and who express a desire to work within the existing system is also quite visible in the public sphere, and will be more closely examined in the case study section.

### **Linda Alcoff: Cultural Feminism and Poststructuralist Feminism**

Feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff has also identified a sort of identity crisis within contemporary feminist thought. She approaches the issue from the standpoint of the logical cohesion (or lack thereof) within the actual philosophies underlying feminist ideas. Alcoff sees the essence issue, and the way feminists approach it, as the primary source of feminism’s problem. She is more charitable to the more progressive feminist ideas than Hoff Sommers, however, and in her work attempts to both define and to

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 26.

mediate between what she identifies as the two primary schools of postmodern feminist thought: cultural feminism and poststructuralist feminism.

Cultural feminism at first glance seems vaguely familiar to Hoff Sommers' maternal feminism, but its underlying ideas are far more radical. For Alcoff, "the concept of woman" - and what her essence may be - is the central issue: "It is the central concept for feminists because the concept and category of woman is the necessary point of departure for any feminist theory and feminist politics...[but] the dilemma facing feminist theorists today is that our very self-definition is grounded in a concept that we must deconstruct and de-essentialize in all of its aspects."<sup>83</sup> Alcoff's reasoning behind this is that, in order to advocate on the behalf of women and to promote the idea of and need for feminism, there must be some understanding or definition of what a woman is; however, any attempt to define a woman is undermined by the male-dominated discourse and culture which has constructed the idea of "woman" in its own biased way.

The two primary responses to this issue have been to either claim that feminists and women "have the exclusive right to describe and evaluate women," or to "reject the possibility of defining woman as such at all."<sup>84</sup> The first response is what Alcoff calls cultural feminism, which argues that the primary issue facing women is that they have let men define them for so long. However, underlying this belief is that men and women have opposing views and interests, and that the process of defining a woman or man can

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<sup>83</sup> Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," in *Feminism and Philosophy: Essential Readings in Theory, Reinterpretation and Application*, ed. Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong (Boulder: San Francisco, 1995), 1.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

be reduced to a zero sum game in which each gender must fight for itself or suffer at the hands of the other.<sup>85</sup> The second response, which Alcoff labels poststructuralist feminism, is rooted in the linguistic and philosophical idea that everything can be “deconstructed,” and that any attempts to define a woman, whether by a feminist or a man or a misogynist, are “politically reactionary and ontologically mistaken.”<sup>86</sup>

This notion, rooted in French poststructuralist theory, allows these feminists to claim “that such errors occur because we are in fundamental ways duplicating misogynist strategies when we try to define women, characterize women, or speak for women, even though allowing for a range of differences within the gender. The politics of gender or sexual difference must be replaced with a plurality of difference where gender loses its position of significance.”<sup>87</sup> This view effectively eliminates the idea of gender altogether, especially as a defining or meaningful characteristic, and thus paradoxically undermines the need for a feminist movement in the first place. As Alcoff readily acknowledges, both responses are seriously problematic, as “transcending these limitations while retaining the theoretical framework from which they emerge is impossible.”<sup>88</sup>

The cultural feminist view does, to some extent, acknowledge the more mainstream belief that femaleness and femininity can be tied to women’s specifically female anatomy and biological capabilities. Alcoff references feminist Mary Daly, for whom “Women's identification as female is their defining essence...their haecceity, overriding any other way in which they may be defined or may define themselves. Thus

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

‘The key point remains that it is our specifically female anatomy that is the primary constituent of our identity and the source of our female essence.’<sup>89</sup> However, cultural feminism is more radical in its embrace of women’s liberation as a counter culture to the status quo and to male culture. One of Alcoff’s sources, Ann Echols, “identifies cultural feminist writings by their denigration of masculinity rather than male roles or practices, by the valorization of female traits, and by their commitment to preserve rather than diminish gender differences.”<sup>90</sup> This mindset seems to set men and women at odds, rather than seeking solutions that are friendly to all human interests.

However, Echols is also critical of cultural feminism because its “preoccupation with defining the female sensibility not only leads these feminists to indulge in dangerously erroneous generalizations about women, but to imply that this identity is innate rather than socially constructed.”<sup>91</sup> One of the counterarguments to those who attempt to explain everything through deconstruction, articulated by Janice Raymond, is that “there are differences, and some feminists have come to realize that those differences are important whether they spring from socialization, from biology, or from the total history of existing as a woman in a patriarchal society.”<sup>92</sup> This point echoes those of many right-leaning feminists, especially Hoff Sommers and Schlafly, who wonder, if the feminist issues are really so serious and so applicable to the lives of most women, then why do so many people, including women, reject them? Some aspects of cultural feminism do seem quite reasonable. Alcoff asks, “After a decade of hearing liberal

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

feminists advising us to wear business suits and enter the male world, it is a helpful corrective to have cultural feminists argue instead that women's world is full of superior virtues and values, to be credited and learned from rather than despised.”<sup>93</sup>

In attempting to expound upon the thinking behind poststructuralist feminism, Alcoff explains, “The mechanism of power referred to here is the construction of the subject by a discourse that weaves knowledge and power into a coercive structure...on this view, essentialist formulations of womanhood, even when made by feminists, ‘tie’ the individual to her identity as a woman and thus cannot represent a solution to sexism.”<sup>94</sup> The problem with this view, when it is applied to social and political movements, is that it places the individual's ability and desire to subjectively create and design their own identity and purpose as the highest moral good - there is not higher order or meaning beyond what the individual creates as part of their autonomous and non-essential identity. As Alcoff explains, “The political struggle can have only a ‘negative function:’ rejecting ‘everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society.”<sup>95</sup> Such a view might be helpful when addressing individual psychological or social difficulties, but it is a problematic way to lead a social movement and a destructive way to lead people in understanding their role in a social, humane world. Alcoff's criticism is rooted in the philosophically challenging aspect of such a view: “Applied to the concept of woman the poststructuralist's view

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 11.



results in what I shall call nominalism: the idea that the category of ‘woman’ is a fiction and that feminist efforts must be directed toward dismantling this fiction.”<sup>96</sup>

Alcoff explains that the appeal of post-structuralism to feminist thinkers is two-fold: “First, it seems to hold out the promise of an increased freedom for women, the ‘free play’ of a plurality of differences unhampered by any predetermined gender identity as formulated by either patriarchy or cultural feminism. Second, it moves decisively beyond cultural feminism and liberal feminism in further theorizing what they leave untouched: the construction of subjectivity.”<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, Alcoff notes the extent to which poststructuralist feminism is a direct descendent of classical liberal views on the individual: “Despite rumblings from the Continent, Anglo-American thought is still wedded to the ideal of a universalizable, apolitical methodology and set of transhistorical basic truths unfettered by associations with particular genders, races, classes, or cultures.”<sup>98</sup> Alcoff sees the generic human idea, promoted in Enlightenment thinking, as closely related to post-structuralism’s designation of “individual particularities such as subjective experience as a social construct,” and claims that “post-structuralism’s negation of the authority of the subject coincides nicely with the classical liberal’s view that human particularities are irrelevant. (For the liberal, race, class, and gender are ultimately irrelevant to questions of justice and truth because ‘underneath we are all the same.’)” Perhaps Alcoff’s most relevant and pressing question is the one that points to the primary problem facing any proponent of poststructuralist feminism: “A feminist

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 13.

adoption of nominalism will be confronted with the same problem theories of ideology have, that is, Why is a right-wing woman's consciousness constructed via social discourse but a feminist's consciousness is not?"<sup>99</sup>

It has been recognized by many feminists in academia that disagreements among feminists are cause for concern, especially those who wish to see feminist ideas of any form succeed. The editors of *Conflicts in Feminism* note in their introduction that,

While feminists have in principle tended to agree that difference is a more productive theoretical and political category than either universalizing consensus or divisive oppositions, in practice, actual differences within feminist discourse have tended to erupt into separate camps. At this moment in time, some of these conflicts have proven so divisive that they seem to foreclose rather than stimulate debate, even at times appearing to threaten the very viability of contemporary feminism as a political and theoretical venture.<sup>100</sup>

The problems that result from such a stifling intellectual climate are apparent not only to those dealing with feminism in theory, but also among those putting it into practice in the classroom or in the public sphere.

The editors of *Conflicts in Feminism* also echo Alcoff's observation that "A common divide keeps forming in both feminist thought and action between the need to build the identity 'woman' and give it solid political meaning and the need to tear down the very category 'woman' and dismantle its all-too-solid history."<sup>101</sup> They recognize that neither approach is without fault: social construction does not seem plausible to the average person, and "to assert that the body has no enduring, natural language often

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>100</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, "Introduction," *Conflicts in Feminism*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

<sup>101</sup> Ann Snitow, "A Gender Diary," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, 9.

seems like a rejection of common sense.”<sup>102</sup> Not only is it a tough sell to a mainstream audience, but also the poststructuralist approach is logically problematic, in that “By definition social construction theory cannot offer a securely bounded area for the study of gender; instead it initiates an inspiring collapse of gender verities.”<sup>103</sup> Alcoff offers a similar sentiment, asking, “If gender is simply a social construct, the need and even the possibility of a feminist politics becomes immediately problematic. What can we demand in the name of women if ‘women’ do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do?”<sup>104</sup> Such an approach eventually leads to an almost nihilistic nothingness - a void in which there is no need for women’s liberation because women do not exist.

The editors also touch on an important dichotomy in feminist thought, somewhat analogous to Alcoff’s cultural feminism and poststructuralist feminism:

Equality and difference are broad ideas and have included a range of definitions and political expressions. Equality, for example, can mean anything from the mildest liberal reform to the most radical reduction of gender to insignificance. Difference can mean anything from Mary Daly’s belief in the natural superiority of women to psychoanalytic theories of how women are inevitably cast as “the Other” because they lack penises.<sup>105</sup>

Clearly, even within two polarized categories - equality and difference feminism - there are still more opportunities for polarization and disagreement.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Linda Alcoff, “Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” 13.

<sup>105</sup> Ann Snitow, “A Gender Diary,” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, 26.

It is clear from Alcoff's essay and from the essays in *Conflicts in Feminism* that this issue is deeply troubling for feminists who are committed to an academic and logically sound feminism that is rooted in reality:

A subjectivity that is fundamentally shaped by gender appears to lead irrevocably to essentialism, the posing of a male/female opposition as universal and ahistorical. A subjectivity that is not fundamentally shaped by gender appears to lead to the conception of a generic human subject, as if we could peel away our 'cultural' layers and get to the real root of human nature, which turns out to be genderless. Are these really our only choices?<sup>106</sup>

I argue that they are not the only choices, and that both cultural feminism and poststructuralist feminism adhere to and even depend fundamentally on an underlying and flawed liberation from essence view.

The problem with the liberation from essence view, as it is found in both cultural feminism and poststructuralist feminism, is that, in dealing with issues of broader social and political relevance, it ultimately places the individual's autonomy and subjectivity as the highest moral good. Whether it follows the cultural feminist line of thinking, which views women's interests and men's interests in opposition to each other and does not presuppose or allow for any mutual interests or synergy beyond the individual woman or man's happiness, or the poststructuralist feminist's view of denying the category of "woman" in the first place, neither view takes larger societal goods into consideration. Neither view considers a purpose outside of the individual's own identity, self-definition in relation to community or tradition, and subjective experience in the world.

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<sup>106</sup> Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," 16.

While such views may have value in a therapeutic or psychological setting, they are destructive ways to view social interactions and to interpret one's role in society and relationships and duties to others. Cultural feminism sees masculinity and femininity as "at war," and can be traced to the type of matriarchal feminism promoted by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, while poststructuralist feminism faces serious logical inconsistencies that threaten to eliminate the notion of women in the first place. Hoff Sommers' offers a more classical liberal and moderate feminism centered on freedom and individual liberties. Thus, we have three primary schools of feminist thought to consider. There are the two that are accepted on the left: poststructuralist feminism and cultural (matriarchal) feminism. Then there is the more right leaning blend of freedom and maternal feminism promoted by Hoff Sommers. This chapter has identified the difficulties that contemporary feminists face in attempting to develop an underlying philosophical impetus for the movement; next I will consider how they are addressing feminism as an academic discipline with a role in educational institutions.

### **PEDAGOGICAL FLAWS**

In *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women's Studies*, by Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, there is a plethora of background and information on the status of Women's Studies as an academic discipline and the role of feminism in the academic sphere. The authors faced much backlash in writing the book - which in some ways amounts to an expose - yet what they are arguing seems entirely reasonable. One of the major issues that concerned them is feminism and Women's Studies' inability to effectively respond to criticism. Instead, the common response is to

try to silence the opponent and shut down critical discussion of the issue. This dismays the authors, who rightly ask, “After all does feminism itself not counsel women to refuse to be silenced by coercive ideological systems? Does feminism not tell us to criticize and dismantle traditions and institutions that harm women by impeding their development in all spheres, including - we would say, especially - the intellectual and moral?”<sup>107</sup> This statement speaks to their concern about feminism’s influence not only on academic and intellectual work but also on individuals and the larger culture in which they live.

While feminism as it is taught in Women’s Studies courses may cater to those who for various personal, psychological, or political reasons are attracted to certain ideologies, it does not in its current form emphasize the importance of intellectual and moral development - unlike many other academic disciplines, it seems to distinctly lack intellectual diversity or pluralism. Both authors themselves had taught in Women’s Studies departments until they found that they were not ideal situations for a true intellectual: Patai and Koertge refer to “the ideological policing and intolerance” that permeates feminist circles, especially in academia, with much concern.<sup>108</sup>

In their research, they interview “‘exiles’ from Women’s Studies - colleagues who still considered themselves to be feminists and whose work and lives have been deeply marked by feminism, but who for one reason or another had withdrawn to other departments or were contemplating such a move.” Their findings ranged from complaints about improper academic procedures to tyrannical decision making to bullying and

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<sup>107</sup> Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women’s Studies*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994), xiv.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, xv.

militant behavior by both colleagues and students. Many of the interviewees actually feared the extent to which their departments were indoctrinating students and lamented the degree to which classrooms felt more like “twelve-step programs or group therapy sessions.”<sup>109</sup> Recognizing that feminists faced immense challenges in establishing a new academic field, and especially one that was so heavily criticized and resented, Patai and Koertge trace the problem in Women’s Studies to two root causes: academic separatism and a deference to political activism.<sup>110</sup> They describe the process as one in which a “sense of vulnerability contributed to the development of a siege mentality.”<sup>111</sup>

The problem with this mentality is that Women’s Studies programs began to see themselves

...as a site of correct political action and therefore promoted not independent inquiry but adherence to a particular line of analysis and to the activities that follow from it. In such cases - as we find in some Women’s Studies programs that attempt to minimize the difference between themselves and groups engaged in feminist activism outside the university - educational aims are made entirely subordinate to political goals.<sup>112</sup>

This means that students and faculty do not engage in critical debate over political and feminist issues, and that there is little emphasis on factual information, supporting claims with data, or being able to reflect on one’s work and ideas in a dispassionate way. Everything is personalized, and students are taught to agree with what everyone else is saying or to just not say anything at all. As the authors explain, “From a feminist pedagogical perspective, there are two ways to resolve the conflict that occurs when

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, xvi.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 7.

people make opposing claims. One can say that each person has her own perspective and all opinions are equally valid (a standard move in family therapy), or one can give preference to the opinion of the person who is most oppressed. Critical discussion becomes difficult, if not impossible, in either circumstance.”<sup>113</sup>

Many of the people interviewed by Patai and Koertge echo sentiments that are much more moderate and tolerant of women’s varying desires and ideals. In thinking about how to improve Women’s Studies as a discipline, one person offered the following:

It would have to be an inclusive model. Before you get to the point of adding issues of race and ethnicity and religion and sexual preference and the disabled and all these other categories of difference, there has to be a respect for other people’s decisions to live certain kinds of lives, whether it’s to have children or not to have children, to be married to men or not to be married to men. These choices can’t be seen as excluding someone from being a thoroughgoing feminist in theory or in practice. And I think there was this problem of exclusion from the beginning.<sup>114</sup>

The particular issue this person refers to - instances in which the powers that be deem some choices feminist and some choices unfeminist - is an unfortunate byproduct of postmodern feminism. This tendency is present both in the classroom, as Patai and Koertge point out, as well as in public discourse, as I will show in the upcoming case studies. Another disturbing phenomenon, which manifests itself in both pedagogical and public ways, is certain feminists’ tendency to see their ideology as immune to criticism: “Although Women’s Studies faculty worry about how to handle disbelieving ‘southern ladies,’ disruptive males, or unenlightened women students, they never take student resistance as a valid indication that there might indeed be something inappropriate about

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 56.



what they are teaching or how they are teaching it.”<sup>115</sup> This mindset - that feminists and feminism can not under any circumstances be criticized - is highly reminiscent of Zerubavel’s points about thought communities and the delusion of logical inevitability that a “true believer” of any ideology will hold.

They also identify feminists’ adherence to the schools of thought described by Alcoff as part of the intellectual problem. These modern and highly abstract theories are rarely taught in the broader context of intellectual history or compared with other alternative ideologies or theories. As they explain, “The popularity of Marxism and the French version of psychoanalysis seems to be waning now, but cultural relativism, standpoint epistemology, social constructionism, theories of linguistic and cultural hegemony, and other progeny of postmodernism are alive and well in feminist classrooms, and are often uncritically embraced there.”<sup>116</sup> These issues are all part of what John Ellis, author of *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*, describes as the “severe intellectual deterioration that has taken place” in the Women’s Studies discipline.<sup>117</sup> Ellis unabashedly ties this supposed deterioration to the radical postmodern notions of constructionism embraced by certain feminists:

No other academic program seems to have leaned so heavily and inventively on social constructionism as has Women’s Studies. The theoretical bedrock of the current wave of feminism is the claim that gender itself is socially constructed, and that different roles played by men and women in society, and the personality characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors ascribed to them, derive

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>117</sup> John M. Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*. (New York: Yale University Press, 1997), 86.

largely from conventional social arrangements, which vary dramatically from culture to culture.<sup>118</sup>

While Ellis clearly is not very sympathetic to the notion of social construction, his point - that an entire academic discipline has rooted itself in a highly specific and recently developed social theory - still stands and is worth noting. Willis also has observed more specifically the way feminism's almost complete embrace of these ideas has harmed intellectual discourse in feminist circles:

Under the influence of deconstruction, this crudity was not only permitted but encouraged as the deepest form of argument, and this is why feminists, for example, now think that they can brush aside objections simply by identifying a critic as sexist or conservative. In this way and others, deconstruction made matters easier for race-gender-class supporters by degrading the intellectual climate of the academy.<sup>119</sup>

While Willis seems to generalize here in claiming all feminists resort to these unrefined approaches to intellectual dialogue, he is correct to point out the way the dominance of one particular school of thought - in this case, deconstruction - has enabled those who do not wish to engage in intellectually productive ways to get away with subpar arguments and unproductive interactions with others.

Patai and Koertge also note the insular and almost separatist nature of Women's Studies as an academic discipline. Their suggestion for improving the visibility of and respect for feminist scholarship is for those involved to engage "in open dialogue with both male and non-feminist female scholars. Separatism unavoidably discourages such

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<sup>118</sup> Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women's Studies*, 138.

<sup>119</sup> John M. Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*, 216.

dialogue. Instead, it favors dogmatic assertion, a standard tactic of ideologically inflamed movements, whether religious or political.”<sup>120</sup> Zerubavel’s insights can help us to better understand the dynamics of an intellectual movement that has morphed into a movement with almost religious undertones. A feminist’s, or in this particular case, a liberation from essence feminist’s distinctive worldview is not something they developed by chance as an individual; “it is an impersonal outlook which they acquire through their membership in a particular professional community.” The process of gaining membership to such a community is what Zerubavel describes as “optical socialization,” typically taking place

...within particular thought communities (a particular profession, a particular religion, a particular generation)...Such ‘optical’ traditions are not just random collections of ways of ‘seeing’ particular objects, but, rather, general, global worldviews...Such general outlooks typically affect the mental vision of entire ‘optical’ communities and not just particular individuals within them, since they are available to practically everyone who wears the community’s distinctive mental lenses and thus commonly shared by all of its members.<sup>121</sup>

Understanding the dynamics of these ideological thought communities - dynamics which occur as often in religious groups and conservative ideological thought communities as they do among those of their liberal and progressive counterparts - illuminates the danger in allowing such a community to dominate intellectual and public discourse, and to silence others in the name of its own supposed right-ness. As Zerubavel emphasizes so strongly, the key aspect to understand is that since “our mental horizons are for the most part neither natural nor logical,” it should be considered highly problematic if any

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<sup>120</sup> Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women’s Studies*, 6.

<sup>121</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, 32.

particular thought community asserts something to the contrary and is actively seeking to suppress further discussion or development of their ideas.<sup>122</sup> In order to remain relevant as a respected academic discipline, it is imperative that feminists and those involved in Women's Studies give due consideration to the issues raised by Patai, Koertge, Willis, and countless others. The problems identified by Patai and Koertge in particular suggest that feminism is more of a religious ideology than an intellectual school of thought, a substantive problem that must be addressed if feminists hope to continue to use academic channels to meaningfully explore women's issues.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Four

### Case Studies of the Liberation from Essence Mentality in the Public Sphere

The following case studies highlight several problematic aspects of the liberation from essence mindset, as it is present in public discourse. While the case studies are singular and specific incidents, they allow for in-depth examination of the way abstract feminist theories play out in public discourse and become visible outside the confines of academia. The goal in presenting these cases is not to demonize those who have engaged productively in the feminist marketplace of ideas and whose contributions have been inspiring and informative to a broad public audience. Rather, these case studies highlight specific behaviors by those who, whether intentionally or not, undermine the success and respectability of the feminist movement by promoting the flawed liberation from essence ideology in illiberal and anti-intellectual ways.

It is helpful to use the case study approach in analyzing the liberation from essence mentality in the public sphere because it will allow for a thorough exploration of the modes of behavior and dynamics of the feminist marketplace of ideas as they occur in practice. My decision to use the case study approach is informed by sociologists Joe Feagin and Anthony Orum's *A Case for the Case Study*, in which they discuss the merits of the case study approach in social science research, especially compared to the dominant reliance on quantitative data and empirical research. The reasons for using the case study approach are two-fold. First, it is in line with my desire to "grasp the nature of

social action as it has been experienced by people themselves.”<sup>123</sup> The purpose of the cases is to understand the human behavior and relationships that underlie these phenomena, rather than to measure or count them. As such, “the narrative form is precisely adapted to communicating these meanings and understandings - the ‘lived’ experience - as experienced by people.”<sup>124</sup> The second reason is more theoretical and relates to the framework I am using not only to justify using the case study method, but also to analyze and understand the dynamics at work in each case. As Feagin and Orum explain, “Advocates of the natural science model assume that an objective world exists independently of the researcher and that one can uncover ‘universal laws’ of human nature and social reality...Thus the units of analysis are independent entities. Typically they are individuals - human beings - but they can be larger units, such as nation-states.”<sup>125</sup> In contrast, the case study approach and the cognitive sociological framework I use in analyzing the cases do not limit its unit of analysis to the individual entity. Instead, it embraces the social nature of individual behaviors, positing that there are patterns of interaction larger than the individual but smaller than the entirety of society.

The case study method is unique in its ability to enable analysis of a set of relationships or a community - in this case the feminist thought community - and also takes into account the inherently social nature of conducting research in the first place. By embracing the sociology of knowledge approach to research, one is able to recognize

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<sup>123</sup> Joe R. Feagin, Anthony M. Orum, and Gideon Sjoberg, *A Case for the Case Study*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 35.

that, “social research is first and foremost a social enterprise,” and to embrace theory “as a social process carried out by researchers...taking place within a social context.”<sup>126</sup>

One potential criticism of the sociology of knowledge approach, and especially its applications in the context of the case study, is that it denies any objectivity or measurable reality and deteriorates its subject matter into meaningless subjectivity. In addressing this concern, Feagin and Orum write, “We too assume the existence of an empirical reality that is somewhat independent of any particular human agent. Moreover, human nature and social reality display an order of sorts. However, the nature of human nature and of social reality is not as fixed as the proponents of the natural science model would have us believe.”<sup>127</sup> This seems to be the aspect of the natural science model that they are most concerned about: “Researchers cannot remove themselves from their own sociocultural setting and achieve objectivity simply by claiming to do so. Although we believe some form of objectivity is possible, it cannot be attained through social experimentation or complex statistical manipulations.”<sup>128</sup> Thus, they see the supposed objectivity of a data-driven study to be somewhat disingenuous and misleading, and do not think it should be the basis for elevating quantitative research over qualitative research. Eviatar Zerubavel, explaining his theory of cognitive sociology, further addresses this potential pitfall: “Optical pluralism or perspectivism does not preclude the existence of an objective reality. It does, however, tie the validity of the different ‘views’ of that reality to particular standpoints rather than to some absolute Truth. As such, it

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 36.

underscores the inherent futility of any attempt to compare different cognitive outlooks to one another in terms of their correctness.”<sup>129</sup> This notion will be important in analyzing the case studies, as it helps to illuminate the dangers of ideologies or movements that privilege certain cognitive outlooks over others in a silencing and suppressing way.

Understanding the history of the case study is also particularly helpful here, as it explains in part why the case study method is useful in my study of feminist thought communities. The debate over the value of the case study approach arose in the midst of a theoretical controversy in sociology during the 1980s, between Randall Collins and Bruce Mayhew, with a third line of thinking offered by Peter Blau. Collins, in agreement with neoclassical economists, posited, “the individual is the basic unit of analysis.”<sup>130</sup> In contrast, Mayhew claimed that sociologists should rid their analyses “of individuals and focus solely on macro (or structural) patterns.”<sup>131</sup> Finally, Blau sought a middle ground in which “the micro and macro levels both have their own integrity and the sociologists are more or less destined to focus solely on macro (or structural) patterns.”<sup>132</sup> This thesis focuses primarily on the structural patterns of the feminist thought community. While the individuals I discuss play a central role in this community, “the self and the social mind are products of interaction with others, and the concept of an independent actor is foreign to such theoretical orientation.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, 30.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



The theoretical basis for using the case study as a research method works nicely with the analytical frameworks developed by cognitive sociologists such as Karl Mannheim and Eviatar Zerubavel. Both Mannheim and Zerubavel were also deeply interested in the social nature of individual behaviors, ideas, and worldviews. Mannheim's essay on the Interpretation of Weltanschauung (1923)

...took up the problem of the proper scientific treatment of 'cultural' objects, such as works of art, philosophy, etc. The main thesis is that such objects cannot be treated by the methods of natural science, for the correct understanding of cultural phenomena always involves the interpretation of meanings, and meanings cannot be 'observed' like the things with which physicists deal. All interpretation, however, presupposes a grasp of some totality, some system, of which meaningful elements are parts; this is again the idea of 'structural analysis,' now applied to historical objects.<sup>134</sup>

In the case of liberation from essence feminist thought communities, we once again see a set of ideas, people, and relationships that cannot be treated as objects to be measured and observed in a quantitative way, and which in fact can only be observed in the context of the larger system in which they exist. This structural approach, which is a fundamental feature of the cognitive sociological method developed by Mannheim, means that a subject should be evaluated "not as an isolated, self-contained unit, but as part of a wider structure; the explanation itself is based not so much on the properties of the thing itself as on the place it occupies within the structure. Adopting this 'structural' approach, one sees that the 'meaning' of some individual phenomenon, e.g. an utterance, can be

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<sup>134</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 12.

determined only with reference to the conceptual system to which it belongs.”<sup>135</sup> In these cases, the individual phenomena are liberation from essence feminists and their behaviors in the public sphere, and the conceptual system to which they belong is the broader feminist thought community and in particular the liberation from essence feminist thought community.

Eviatar Zerubavel’s concept of thought communities is rooted in his theory that, while

the particular way in which we happen to ‘close’ our minds is strikingly similar to the way many others around us close theirs, it is also quite different from the way many other humans do, which serves to remind us that our own particular focusing patterns are by no means universal and thereby underscores the need to avoid the common epistemological pitfall of reifying our own horizons and regarding them as inevitable...Our horizons, in other words, are for the most part, neither natural nor logical.<sup>136</sup>

An adamant belief in one’s own right-ness and a fundamentalist zeal for one’s own ideology, in the eyes of someone sympathetic to Zerubavel’s theory, is not only intellectually dishonest but also dangerous when carried to its extreme.

The following case studies will each highlight various problematic aspects of the liberation from essence view within the feminist thought community. The first aspect is the promotion of a stringent ideology that rests on the idea that there are some choices that should count as “feminist” and some that shouldn’t, even when made by an informed, autonomous woman. The second aspect is derived from Marxist and Frankfurt School thinking - the idea that any supporters of the traditional systems or critics of the

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>136</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, 41.

new system (in this case, the new system is liberation from essence feminism) are simply blinded by their own privilege or ignorance and are tools of society's systems of oppression. The third aspect is intolerance to dissent and an unwillingness to engage with views or ideas that are deemed too critical or simply "unfeminist" by the powers that be. For female or self-identified feminist critics, any one of these aspects or a combination of the three can result in being labeled a traitor and effectively purged from the community. These behaviors and the rationales behind them are disturbingly prevalent in the public sphere. Using the analytical frameworks developed by Mannheim and Zerubavel, we can analyze these interactions to better understand these problematic aspects of liberation from essence feminism as it permeates the public sphere.

### **Case Study 1: Feminist Efforts to Shame Candace Cameron Bure**

A recent and particularly revealing incident is the case of Candace Cameron Bure. Bure, an actress famous for her childhood role on the 1990s TV show "Full House," is now in her late thirties, and has been married to her husband for over twenty years. Bure and her husband are known for their Christian faith, and she has also recently begun a career as an author. In her most recent book, *Balancing It All: My Story of Juggling Priorities and Purpose*, she discusses her experiences as a working wife and mother.

The controversy began when Bure appeared in an interview for *Huffington Post*. In the interview, when asked about her book, she explicitly stated:

It's not giving you ten steps as to how to balance your life perfectly. We all have a unique life and our circumstances are different, and I think when we as women, because we all want to be able to balance and juggle so many things at the same time and we get overwhelmed, and its like, 'oh well, how does this person, how do they seem to be doing this so perfectly all the time?' and

that's what I talk about in the book, and that each of our lives do look unique, so I can't expect to be balancing my life the same way that my neighbor is or this woman is... and I think it will just give everyone a big sigh of relief.<sup>137</sup>

Clearly, Bure is sharing her story with those who are interested, rather than attempting to preach or to prescribe a certain lifestyle to everyone. It is clear from her language that she sees her book more as a personal story that some might find comforting or inspiring, but that she certainly does not see herself as having written a manifesto that she thinks all women must follow.

However, many media outlets, ignoring her stated intentions, found themselves preoccupied with a specific passage in her book:

My husband is a natural-born leader. I quickly learned that I had to find a way of honoring his take-charge personality and not get frustrated about his desire to have the final decision on just about everything. I am not a passive person, but I chose to fall into a more submissive role in our relationship because I wanted to do everything in my power to make my marriage and family work.<sup>138</sup>

This quote represents what some might find to be an antiquated view, shaped by strong religious beliefs that are rarely found among present day women, let alone among celebrities. The ensuing feminist response to her views on her own role in a marriage strongly exemplify two problematic aspects of the liberation from essence mindset: first, the notion that certain women's choices are feminist while others' are not; and second, an unwillingness to engage in productive dialogue, instead turning to insults and demonization. Women's fashion magazine *Marie Claire* tweeted a particularly vicious

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<sup>137</sup> "Candace Cameron Bure On Balancing a 'Full House,'" by Nancy Redd, *Huffington Post Live*, January 6, 2014. <http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/candace-cameron-bure-full-house-balancing-it-all/52b0901ffe34440d780000bb>

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

message regarding Bure's statements, quipping, "Thanks Candace Cameron, for setting women back approximately a billion years..."<sup>139</sup> Interestingly, other recent tweets from *Marie Claire* indicate perhaps what the magazine sees as moving women forward. One tweet offers a link to read about "How one girl planned her MENAGE A TROIS," while another asks, "The Great Ass Debate: What do guys REALLY think of women's butts?"<sup>140</sup> Yet another tweet tells readers "How to get FREE birth control NOW #Obamacare," with a link to the *Marie Claire* website.

Clearly, *Marie Claire*, as a widely-read mainstream news and lifestyle source for women, has identified certain decisions and choices that are pro-woman and certain ones that are retrograde and harmful, and they believe it is their duty to pontificate and to demonize women who make choices that fall into the wrong category. Leaving aside whether or not Bure's advice on having a successful marriage is perhaps more constructive and helpful to the average woman than *Marie Claire*'s advice on what most men think of their backsides, there is a clear dynamic here in which a prominent cultural force, in the form of a widely read women's magazine, attacks an educated, professional woman for dissenting from the accepted feminist views on what lifestyle and moral beliefs a proper feminist should hold. In this case, Bure is advocating a more traditional, religion-oriented view of her role as a woman and a wife, while *Marie Claire* and Bure's other critics see this view as antiquated and inherently flawed, instead promoting a liberation from essence view in which traditional feminine roles and behaviors are

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<sup>139</sup> "Marie Claire mag skewered for absurd jab at Candace Cameron Bure," Twitchy.com, January 10, 2014. <http://twitchy.com/2014/01/10/marie-claire-mag-skewered-for-absurd-jab-at-candace-cameron-bure/>

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

rejected and replaced, and in which personal fulfillment and sexual liberation are instead considered the most important goals for women. Though Bure is consciously making an informed decision to take on a certain role in her seemingly successful and happy marriage, her critics insist that this cannot be true: her freely made choice is a bad one, one that is “unfeminist” and in some way actively harmful to other women because it does not promote a liberation from essence view.

Many feminists might balk at the accusation that their ideas and theories should be associated with *Marie Claire* or any other mainstream women’s magazines - after all, the tweets referenced above are geared almost exclusively towards sexually-liberated, straight women in a way that could be deemed objectifying or offensive. Yet, this is exactly the point: when a liberation from essence mindset permeates the public sphere, it is no longer being dealt with purely in theoretical form. The debate between “difference” and “equality” is no longer relevant, and the discussion has instead impacted the average person. Bure’s ideas were also heavily criticized on Joan Velez-Mitchell’s CNN show, “Headline News.” Velez-Mitchell shrieked, rolled her eyes, interrupted one of the guests attempting to explain the Biblical meaning of the term “submissive,” and called Bure’s ideas “ridiculous.” Another guest on the show ignored Bure’s previous explanation of the purpose of her book, instead falsely claiming that Bure’s goal was to tell other women, “do it my way, because that’s the right way.”<sup>141</sup> This treatment of Bure’s ideas was not

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<sup>141</sup> Jim Treacher, “HLN host freaks out over gender roles and the Bible and whatnot,” *Daily Caller*, January 13, 2014. <http://dailycaller.com/2014/01/13/hln-host-freaks-out-over-gender-roles-and-the-bible-and-whatnot/>.

only obnoxious, but it was ignorant and disrespectful – more revealing of the intolerance of Velez-Mitchell than the supposed problems with Bure’s lifestyle.

As discussed earlier, the particularly troubling aspect of this is not necessarily the promotion of liberation from essence views over other views, but rather, that only decisions and ideas that fall under the liberation from essence umbrella are considered valid and worthy of respect. Like Linda Alcoff points out so astutely, there seems to be an impasse here in which Bure’s critics privilege the validity of their own worldview and ideology over hers. Criticisms like those coming from *Marie Claire* are the real-world product of an ideological theory that uses deconstructionism to undermine any systems, traditions, or ideologies that they find problematic without duly applying it to their own ideology.

As demonstrated in the case of Candace Cameron Bure, this tendency is not only hypocritical and frustrating for the victims of such ideological attacks, but it is also theoretically flawed and fundamentally illiberal. Bure’s critics, while eager to mock and criticize her, refused to engage with her ideas on an intellectual level, instead choosing to unproductively avoid a serious conversation about the issues she addressed in her book or in her particular worldview.

### **Case Study 2: Christina Hoff Sommers and the Bullying Behavior Exhibited Toward Dissident Feminists**

The mainstream feminist treatment of philosopher and “dissident” feminist Christina Hoff Sommers ranges from legitimately argued criticisms to infantile and ideological jabs. The latter reactions, of course, are the most interesting to analyze, as

they are surprisingly prevalent and highly visible to the average person and the general public through media sources ranging from *Jezebel* to the *New York Times*. Feminist news website *Jezebel* featured a particularly salient article, titled “Dumb Opinion: Little Boys Need Toy Guns to Survive,” in response to Hoff Sommers’ article, “School Has Become Too Hostile to Boys,” published in *Time*. The author of the *Jezebel* piece, Katie J.M. Baker, quipped, “Christina Hoff Sommers, champion of conservative feminism and boyz II menz rights, argues that schools' "efforts to re-engineer the young-male imagination" by penalizing them for loving guns and superheroes are destroying our best and brightest young men, who can only be happy and successful if they have big guns in their pockets.”<sup>142</sup> While one could easily focus only on the author’s exaggerated rhetoric and flippant attitude towards the work of a highly regarded academic, the primary point illustrated here is the ease and even eagerness with which mainstream feminist journalists and figureheads dismiss Hoff Sommers, both academically and politically.

Multiple other *Jezebel* articles feature the same attitude of contempt towards anyone who dissents from their hardline viewpoint. In an article about gender-neutral toys, another *Jezebel* author, Tom Scocca, mocked Hoff Sommers’ views on the issue: “Christina Hoff Sommers - who has made a nice career in the Boys' Toys section of the opinion-having business by arguing over and over that men have been victimized by feminism - explained to the readers of *The Atlantic's* website how dangerous this intervention in the toy-marketing business really is,” before selectively quoting her with

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<sup>142</sup> Katie J.M. Baker, “Dumb Opinion: Little Boys Need Toy Guns to Thrive,” *Jezebel*, August 22, 2013. <http://jezebel.com/dumb-opinion-little-boys-need-toy-guns-to-thrive-1182688675>



little context or fair analysis.<sup>143</sup> Hoff Sommers, who began her career as a liberal feminist professor, began to face rabid criticism when she questioned common feminist claims and approaches to intellectual inquiry. As she describes it herself,

In the late 1980s, I began to have disagreements with some of my colleagues in philosophy. In 1988, I actually went to the American Philosophical Association and read a paper critical of key points in academic feminism. I thought it would be a lively debate and that people would be angry. That often happens in the American Philosophical Association. But you always part as friends and go out for drinks and so on. But we did not part as friends at that event. People were furious. They were hissing. One woman almost fainted. I had never experienced anything like it. That evening I was excommunicated from a religion I didn't even know existed.<sup>144</sup>

Of course, one of her major criticisms of feminism is exactly that: it functions more as a religion than an academic discipline, in which any critics are treated as infidels or heretics, rather than intellectual equals who should be taken seriously and engaged with respectfully. Hoff Sommers summarizes, “As a philosopher, you have to want dissent. That keeps you honest and keeps the research credible. But they didn't appreciate any kind of dissent in the movement and that spelled trouble. There is a system of quality control in scholarship, it is called criticism. But they were disallowing it.”<sup>145</sup> Her treatment in the media as a result of making these claims is revealed not only in the sarcasm of *Jezebel* articles but also more seriously in the way she is subtly silenced or criticized by those in positions of power. Instead of engaging with her ideas or treating

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<sup>143</sup> Tom Scocca, “Down with Toy Apartheid,” *Jezebel*, December 18, 2012. <http://jezebel.com/down-with-toy-apartheid-the-gender-apocalypse-of-the-p-5971750>

<sup>144</sup> “The Future of Feminism: An Interview with Christina Hoff Sommers,” by Scott London. <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/sommers.html>

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

her as an intellectual equal, these critics not only dismiss and mock her work, but also seem respond in retaliation to her for dissenting in the first place.

For example, one particularly illustrative incident occurred when Hoff Sommers published *Who Stole Feminism?* in 1994. The book, a harsh critique of contemporary feminism, was not only “met with the bitter hostility of campus feminists,” but was also perhaps unfairly treated by the prominent *New York Times Book Review*.<sup>146</sup> The person chosen to review it by the *New York Times*, Nina Auerbach, was a professor and radical feminist at the University of Pennsylvania. Hoff Sommers found the decision to have Auerbach review her book to be a blatant conflict of interest: “The book was basically about her and her sisters. She was even a key figure. The book opens with a parody of a feminist conference in which she was a presenter. She couldn't possibly be objective...She went on the talk circuit and did radio shows about how she despised the book.”<sup>147</sup> The decision to have Auerbach review the book was described by others as plainly malicious, resulting in a “predictable trashing,” and criticisms of unethical behavior on the part of Auerbach and the editor, Auerbach’s former student, who chose her to write the review.<sup>148</sup> Beyond these concerns, however, was also the observation that such a negative and hasty review by the *New York Times* is an anomaly: the editor at the time was “known to urge authors to find something good in a book or just leave it alone and let it die...but it didn’t happen with my book. It was reviewed by the *New York Times*

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<sup>146</sup> John M. Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*, 86.

<sup>147</sup> “The Future of Feminism: An Interview with Christina Hoff Sommers,” by Scott London. <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/sommers.html>

<sup>148</sup> John M. Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*, 254.

within days of its publication date - which is again unusual, they are often late and authors don't like that. But they were right on target. I think they wanted to kill this book.”<sup>149</sup>

The other ironic aspect of the Christina Hoff Sommers case is that, in response to her criticisms about the lack of scientific and intellectual rigor within feminist circles, some groups sunk to the exact levels that she expected them to: “The AAUW, a group that did what I think was a very inadequate study of girls and self-esteem, did not reply to my criticism or correct the many mistakes I identified but chose instead to fax me pages and pages of denunciations and attacks. That was disappointing because that is not the way you expect a once very well-regarded organization to behave.”<sup>150</sup> Instead of engaging in an intellectual discussion about the merits of their own work or the problems with Hoff Sommers’ ideas, the AAUW instead resorted to bullying attacks - precisely the type of behavior Hoff Sommers found so disappointing and alarming in the first place.

Hoff Sommers’ outsider status is also evident in the way she and her school of thought - equity feminism - are treated in *Bitch* magazine article “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Feminism But Were Afraid to Ask.” The article, which lists various schools of feminism thought and their definitions, ranging from “womanism” to “cultural feminism” to “antiporn feminism,” offers a short and uncharitable description of equity feminism:

This is a sly attempt by antifeminist "feminists"—such as Christina Hoff Sommers, author of *Who Stole Feminism?* (1994), and the

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<sup>149</sup> “The Future of Feminism: An Interview with Christina Hoff Sommers,” by Scott London. <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/sommers.html>

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

freaky neocon think tank called the Independent Women's Forum - to appeal to the sentient public that by and large agrees with concepts like equal pay for equal work without actually acknowledging that sexism still exists. (Who can argue with equity?) But as wielded by Hoff Sommers, the IWF, and others, it's really just another word for antifeminism, unchecked capitalism, corporate welfare, and neoconservatism.<sup>151</sup>

This description contrasts with the much more positive descriptions of every other form of feminism in the article - it is a glaring exception, and its lack of objectivity and intentional unfairness is hard to miss.

What is perhaps most disturbing about the Christina Hoff Sommers case is that there are people who do engage critically with her ideas and treat her as an intellectual peer rather than a second-class citizen. Unfortunately, and the reason this dynamic is so concerning, the most high-profile responses to Hoff Sommers' work are vindictive, dismissive, and anti-intellectual. These responses in publications such as *Jezebel* and the *New York Times* are deviations from the norm in that both sources do report far more objectively and constructively on other issues and people, making the singling out of Hoff Sommers even more concerning and revealing of the targeted silencing mechanisms at work.

### **Case Study 3: Clementine Ford as an Example of Feminist Hypocrisy and Condescension**

Clementine Ford, a contemporary feminist blogger and journalist, represents liberation from essence feminism at its illiberal extreme. The following excerpts from

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<sup>151</sup> Rachel Fudge, "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Feminism But Were Afraid To Ask," Bitch Media, 2005. <http://bitchmagazine.org/article/everything-about-feminism-you-wanted-to-know-but-were-afraid-to-ask>

two different articles by Ford exemplify the type of rhetoric indicative of the presence of liberation from essence ideals in the media. What is most concerning about this particular case is that Ford puts forth a disturbing view in which some women's free and autonomous choices are good while other choices are wrong and should be actively disrespected. In contrast to those sympathetic to classical liberal notions of freedom and individuality, Ford claims that exercising choice alone is not enough to make one free or autonomous: "'Choice' and the ability to exercise it in and of itself is not a feminist act...defending women's right to choose whatever they like doesn't mean other women have a duty to agree with those choices or even respect them."<sup>152</sup> This is contrary to the classical liberal and more commonly accepted belief that an individual who is able to make informed choices (provided they are not directly harmful to others) is exercising freedom, and should be respected as such. It is interesting that Ford specifically states that choice and the ability to make it - a state that characterizes the classical liberal ideal of freedom - is not feminist.

She further explains this viewpoint when she depicts motherhood as incompatible with the essential aspects - whatever they may be - which allow one to function autonomously. She portrays choosing motherhood as directly in conflict with being free or autonomous, suggesting that the feminine essence of and biological need for motherhood is different and incompatible with the essence of autonomy. Ford articulates what has become a common postmodern feminist approach to understanding freedom and

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<sup>152</sup> Clementine Ford, "Five myths about women that need to die in 2013," Daily Life, December 18, 2012. <http://www.dailylife.com.au/dl-women-of-the-year/five-myths-about-women-that-need-to-die-in-2013-20121217-2bidg.html>

autonomy, especially as they apply to women and feminists: “Mothers also face an exclusion in parts of society, and suffer the indignity of being assumed to have lost an essential part of their autonomous identities as women. By all means, women should make family central to their lives if that's their choice. But it's dangerous to view it as a life goal, as an act that will secure happiness at the expense of the pursuits that will secure freedom, independence and autonomy.”<sup>153</sup> Here, Ford slightly backtracks on her claim that certain women’s choices should not be respected, though she does not hesitate to frame decisions such as becoming a mother (a choice made by the vast majority of women) as dangerous.

Here, we see the liberation from essence mindset, and its ties to postmodern thinking, at work: despite the fact that for many centuries women have continued to become mothers and raise children, Ford treats this pattern of behavior as if it is an ignorant and stupid decision made by uninformed women who simply need to be educated about the autonomy and independence that they are missing out on. She describes women who embrace more traditional views in a particularly disdainful way:

These stereotypes are sometimes perpetuated by other women who have been so successfully sold the myth of their own inferiority that they have instead sought symbolic power by presenting themselves to men as turncoats; little foot soldiers who can be relied upon to reinforce patriarchal norms and whose loyalty is rewarded in compliments, pats on the head and a smattering of crumbs saved from the table.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Clementine Ford, “The family ties that bind,” *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, March 8, 2013. <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/4560106.html>

<sup>154</sup> Clementine Ford, “Don’t Get Even, Ladies; Get Mad,” *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, March 7, 2014. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-03-07/ford-dont-get-even-ladies-get-mad/5304704>.

Here, Ford continues to belittle women who make choices that she deems unworthy of respect, and to question their ability to make such decisions. Ironically, as she criticizes the “patriarchy” and traditional roles for women, she is particularly condescending towards these women - treating them as if they are incapable of properly evaluating their own decisions, are easily coerced, and reducing their behavior to that of small animals whose only goal is to gain affection and food rewards. It is interesting to note that Mannheim’s legacy is relevant in this aspect of the case. Originally responding to Marxist ideology, “Mannheim wanted to go beyond a Marxist orthodoxy according to which proletarian class-conscious thought alone represented reality as it was, ‘adequately,’ while all those not sharing this class perspective were necessarily deluded.”<sup>155</sup> Such an endeavor is still quite useful if not necessary in helping to understand some of the particularly concerning strands of radicalism today, including liberation from essence feminism, in which, similar to Marxist orthodoxy, any dissenters are considered deluded lost causes who must be vilified and silenced.

Ford’s perplexing treatment of other women and their choices does not stop here, however; her opinions on sex workers further illustrate the hypocrisy of the liberation from essence mindset. In discussing the way the average person regards sex workers, she claims, “Demonizing sex workers under the guise of “helping” them is simply a way of expressing puritanical snobbery.”<sup>156</sup> She dismisses any other concerns a critic might

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<sup>155</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, 12.

<sup>156</sup> Clementine Ford, “Debunking the Myths of Sex Work,” *Daily Life*, August 30, 2013. <http://www.dailylife.com.au/health-and-fitness/debunking-the-myths-of-sex-work-20130429-2iodn.html>

voice about the dangers of or problems with the sex industry and reduces them all to an abstract notion of holier-than-thou prudishness. In defending sex workers and those who chose to enter the industry, she opines, “Fundamentally, I support the women and men who choose to work in the sex industry regardless of what may have led them to it. We make choices about our lives for a number of different reasons, and the context of those choices is nobody's business but ours.”<sup>157</sup> This declaration that people “make choices” for a “number of different reasons” and that the context of those choices is no one else’s business seems to apply only to those choices that Ford finds admirable; in this case, entering the sex industry must be respected but becoming a mother or getting married should be actively criticized.

Ford’s mindset and the behaviors analyzed in the previous case studies are revealing of the liberation from essence outlook when it is taken to its extreme, leaving academia and theoretical discussions and instead impacting the lives of real women in the broader social world. While these behaviors are on display in a variety of contentious situations in which various ideologies are competing for followers, regardless of political or philosophical orientation, it is particularly concerning that these patterns of behavior occur under the guise of a movement aimed to help all women. Interactions such as the ones described in the case studies suggest that these claims are disingenuous at best and intolerant and illiberal at worst.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.



## **Conclusion**

This analysis of contemporary feminism, and specifically liberation from essence feminism derived from the postmodern condition of society, has revealed many flaws in the movement - flaws both unique to feminism and flaws that might be found in any strong ideological movement. In conducting this analysis, my intent was not to undermine the admirable efforts of women who have dedicated their lives and careers to improving conditions for women everywhere, and whose intellectual contributions have added immensely to our body of knowledge and our ways of thinking about the world around us. Rather, my hope was to show the ways in which any ideological movement - though in this particular case, feminism - can veer off course and head in an unproductive, anti-intellectual, and illiberal direction. I hope it is clear from the cognitive sociological approach used in my analysis that my aim has not been to completely invalidate certain feminist ideas; rather, it has been a critique of the ways these ideas can be manipulated to do more harm than good.

My research in preparing this thesis has indicated many times over that there are many men and women who are rooting for a more productive and appealing worldview to evolve out of the current state of feminist thought. From intellectuals to celebrities to students, there is a market for a worldview that recognizes the importance of freedom and autonomy but does not take these abstract notions to their radical extremes, isolating the average person in the process. While I will leave the development of a new feminist theory to philosophers such as Christina Hoff Sommers and Linda Alcoff (for now), it is

clear from this analysis that there are several key steps that must be taken in order to enable and facilitate the process.

The first step is for high-profile universities, media sources, and individuals to prioritize constructive dialogue and to promote intellectual diversity over the bullying and vindictive behavior that has become disturbingly prevalent in both the classroom and the public sphere. While this may not be a realistic expectation for individuals or publications that acknowledge a strong bias in a particular direction, universities, professors, and those who purport to work for unbiased or balanced publications should readily address this issue. Authors such as Patai and Koertge should continue to set an example by criticizing anti-intellectual behaviors within university and educational settings, and critics should continue to respond when a supposedly balanced publication such as the *New York Times Book Review* tendentiously reviews a work by a notably contentious author.

It is vital that critics point out the disingenuous nature of universities that claim to promote liberal educational values, yet routinely allow debate and conversation to be stifled. This is especially true in departments known for these types of issues, and it should be made quite clear to students and professors alike that “Since Women’s Studies programs function as parts of colleges and universities, they are expected to offer their students at least the semblance of a liberal education; they could not otherwise justify their status within academic institutions.”<sup>158</sup> This is a cause that any intellectual or

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<sup>158</sup> Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women’s Studies*, 81.

academic should support, regardless of personal political views or ideology. Controversial feminist author Kate Roiphe, responding to the question, “Who gets to be a feminist?” grasps the challenging nature of this issue quite adeptly:

I am suspicious of a movement that wants to dictate a checklist of ideology, that wants to project into the world a party line of acceptable beliefs. Instead, to be vibrant and strong and relevant, feminism should include people with disparate and conflicting views; it should have room for Mary Wollstonecraft, and Emma Goldman, and Camille Paglia, and Christina Hoff Sommers. It should have room for those who are, for instance, pro- and anti-choice. Once we start itemizing: She is allowed, she is not allowed - admittedly a schoolyard instinct women seem to love and don't ever really outgrow - we have to ask who gets to choose?<sup>159</sup>

Roiphe clearly understands the importance of maintaining pluralism and room for debate, discussion, and progress in any movement that purports to be intellectual and claims space in the academy. A movement that does not embrace these ideals might as well be a political party or a religious group, and its fervor and close-mindedness would surely mean it could not claim a special place in a liberal arts setting.

Second, those attempting to disseminate feminist ideas in the public sphere should recognize that, while abstruse radical rhetoric might play a valuable role in theoretical discussions, it is not a practical way to engage a mainstream audience. When feminists use this type of rhetoric, claiming that those who do not agree with their views are simply ignorant of all the oppression they face or are unwitting tools coerced by the patriarchy, they isolate many women (not to mention men). If feminists' intended audience is not

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<sup>159</sup> Katie Roiphe, “Who Gets to Be a Feminist?” *Slate*, October 7, 2010. [http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/features/2010/who\\_gets\\_to\\_be\\_a\\_feminist/you\\_cant\\_own\\_feminism.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/features/2010/who_gets_to_be_a_feminist/you_cant_own_feminism.html)

engaging with their ideas as planned, the situation may call for revisiting their arguments and evidence, rather than condescending to and belittling anyone who disagrees. As Patai and Koertge emphasize, “Responsibility for the difficulties faced by Women’s Studies lies, in our view, not primarily with malevolent patriarchy and its effects but with the ideological variant of feminism that has been embraced by and incorporated into the academy.”<sup>160</sup> By embracing a more liberal pedagogical and rhetorical approach, feminists could not only engage a much broader audience, but could build academic and intellectual credibility for Women’s Studies among both those who attempt to discredit it out of ignorance and those who have been driven out by overzealous ideologues.

Additionally, in order to promote a feminism that most humans will be able to relate to, feminists should give serious consideration to the ways in which they can promote respect for individuals’ informed choices about how to pursue a career or a family, even if they would not make such a choice themselves. This has been a point of tension in the feminist movement for decades, and does not seem any closer to a reasonable resolution than it was many years ago. Even Betty Friedan recognized the importance of addressing this issue. Though her ideas were revolutionary at the time, they are at odds with those of later feminists. Of her rift with her feminist successors, Friedan remarked, “I’m at odds with the radical feminists because I’m not anti-marriage and anti-family. I always thought it was dangerous to go against the idea of the family. I don’t even like the phrase ‘women’s liberation’ because that idea of being set free from

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<sup>160</sup> Daphne Patai and Noretta Koertge, *Professing Feminism: Cautionary Tales from the Strange World of Women’s Studies*, 48.

everything doesn't seem right to me."<sup>161</sup> Like Friedan, the average woman in a Western country may not actually know what she is supposed to be liberated from, as many women make informed and enthusiastic decisions to marry and have children as a central part of their identity, contrary to whatever their feminist critics may say.

In this vein, it would be far more productive for feminists to embrace the classical liberal roots of their ideology by recognizing what Hoff Sommers calls "the great achievement of feminism" - asserting the truth "that women are individuals."<sup>162</sup> It follows from this that "it's going to be hard to have any group that represents the 'women's point of view.' We are not locked into a single point of view. There are women conservatives. There are radicals. There are anarchists. There are the traditionalists, and so forth. We are diverse, we are individuals. So it's going to be hard to have a movement that represents all of us. And that's one of the things I object to."<sup>163</sup> There is no way to please everyone - but it is possible to promote women's (and everyone's) individual liberties and to advocate for women to seek the education and information they need to maximize these liberties.

Finally, I think it is crucial to acknowledge the immense progress that has already been made for women and men everywhere. John Ellis, a harsh critic of feminists' reluctance to admit this progress, somewhat exaggeratedly suggests that feminists address this issue: "Nonetheless, powerful emotional resistance prevents many feminists

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<sup>161</sup> Hopkins, Kara. "Room of Her Own." *The American Conservative*. April 24, 2006. <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/room-of-her-own/>.

<sup>162</sup> "The Future of Feminism: An Interview with Christina Hoff Sommers," by Scott London. <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/sommers.html>

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

(especially radical feminists) from accepting the fact that the capitalist economies of the West have been the engine for change for women. Rather than lament the entire past of humanity as one long display of male oppression, they should focus on exploring the promising but uncharted future.”<sup>164</sup> While this suggestion is a bit snarky, its underlying message is important: there has been rapid and unprecedented economic progress over the last two centuries that has immensely improved living conditions across the world and has enabled feminists to explore and carry out many of their goals. This progress suggests an optimistic future to look forward to, including rapidly improving outlooks for more men and women in still-developing parts of the world - hardly something to dismiss as part of the patriarchy or to ignore for fear of becoming irrelevant.

Interestingly, and perhaps comfortingly, Ann Snitow, cited earlier for her disdain for womanhood and promotion of androgyny, made one of the most salient comments I have seen regarding the state of feminism. It seems particularly apt to quote her here, as she seems to truly grasp the reasons why feminists find it so difficult to develop a cohesive movement with mainstream appeal, and at the same time, to recognize how such a movement might develop in the future. Snitow writes,

Culture offers a variety of rewards to women for always giving attention to others first. Love is a special female responsibility. Some feminists see this female giving as fulfilling and morally powerful. Others see it as a mark of oppression and argue that women are given the job of ‘life,’ but that any job relegated to the powerless is one undervalued by the society as a whole. Yet in our group there was one area of agreement: Traditional women’s

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<sup>164</sup> Ellis, John M. (1997). *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities*, 88.

concerns - for life, for children, for peace - should be everyone's.<sup>165</sup>

Perhaps the most appealing and effective feminist movement would recognize that most men and women do value life and children, and that a movement centered solely on the subversion of social norms and expectations, development of individual autonomy, and personal fulfillment may be both unappealing to the average person and harmful to society. This does not mean that a regressive shift to traditional obligations to family, church, or the state is necessarily in order; however, it does mean that the human need for these common values and ways of belonging - reminiscent of Durkheim's collective consciousness - might be more effectively incorporated into feminist ideology in order to better appeal to a mainstream audience.

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<sup>165</sup> Ann Snitow, "A Gender Diary," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, 24.

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